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# Perspectives and Post-release Experiences of Convicted African American Women Drug Offenders

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Janet Olusola Fashakin

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Walden University  
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Abstract  
Perspectives and Post-release Experiences of Convicted African American Women Drug  
Offenders  
by

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LLM, Yeshiva University, 2005

LLB, Obafemi Awolowo University, 1990

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

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## Abstract

Prisons in the United States are full to capacity because of the revolving doors created by recidivism. African American women comprise a significant proportion of those who return to prison, yet most studies about women and recidivism focus on the experiences of white women. The communities into which formerly incarcerated African American women are released do not make things easier in terms of the potential for reoffending because of the difficult access to good jobs, safe housing, good health care services, and assistance with child care services. Using Cullen's social support theory as the foundation, the purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore the perspectives and post-release experiences of participants while living in their community. Fourteen African American ex-convicted women, ages 18 to 55 who reside in a large mid-Atlantic city participated in open-ended interviews to further explore the social factors related to recidivism. These data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key findings include that success is tied to a sense of self, most participants expressed a sense of gratitude for their success, and that family, friends, government support, and the effects of rehabilitation programs contribute to success in living in communities after release from prison. The positive social change implications of this study include recommendations to correctional officials to focus on strengthening opportunities for pro-social interactions with appropriate support systems including working with other government agencies to reach out to formerly incarcerated African American women for services that are unique to their needs and circumstances. These efforts may improve public safety through reductions in future crimes.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late mother who despite not having much, made sure that my siblings and I had a good education. To all my siblings, my children, and my dedicated friends who believed in this journey, I thank you all. To the Almighty God, who is my provider, my supporter, and encourager, be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

It is important for the U.S. justice system to exert as much effort on the tail end of the system as it does at the front end, that way there can be a decrease in reoffending among formerly incarcerated people instead of an increase in recidivism. The topic I focused on in this study was the perspectives and experiences of postconviction African American women drug offenders after their release from prison. The demographic area under study was a large mid-Atlantic city, and the targeted participants were between ages 18 to 55 years old, residing in the community without any form of supervision. This topic is a significant issue because, according to Hughes and Wilson (as cited in James, 2015, p. 1), 95% of prisoners will be released back into the community at some point and will reside in the community; hence, the results of this study could influence public policy on recidivism among women, especially African American women.

Equally worrisome is the fact that African Americans represent only about 13% of the U.S. population yet are more than twice as likely to be imprisoned than White women (Carson, 2015, p. 15). According to the State of New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (2013), African American women make up 43% of the prison population (p. 5). As compared to Whites, African Americans face further hardships due to the magnifying effect of race in reintegration (Cobbina, Morash, Kashy, & Smith, 2014). Many return offenders into the prison system are African Americans; yet, even though there are many studies on the reentry population in general, very few studies exist on African American women (Sharp, 2014).

Chapter 1 will include the background of the study to introduce the topic to the general audience. Following the background will be the problem statement and purpose of the study, which will then be followed by the research questions. Afterward, I will introduce the theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions, and assumptions. A discussion of the scope, limitations, and delimitations will then follow. The chapter will conclude with the significance of the study and a summary.

### **Background**

Employment opportunities are not as available in the communities to which African Americans return in relation to Whites (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011); thus, it is often difficult for African American women who have been recently released from prison to find and secure employment. This may be further compounded by the problems of how to obtain financial sustenance for themselves and their dependent children; an unprejudiced reintegration into and acceptance by the community; and access to reentry programs, services, and focus groups that consistently reiterate good choices and habits with the hope of preventing recrimination (Hlavka, Wheelock, & Jones, 2015). Recent post-release research conducted across the United States showed that 58% of previously incarcerated women are rearrested, 38% are reconvicted, and 30% return to prison within 3 years of their release from prison (Harding, Wyse, Dobson, & Morenoff, 2011). Harding et al. (2011) found that ex-offenders face a “high risk of economic insecurity” as a direct result of the “challenges they face in finding employment” (p. 440).

The incidents precipitating imprisonment and the post-release experiences of African American women are uniquely different from that of their male counterparts

(Binswanger, 2011). African American women who serve prison time for drug possession or drug offending, which can be distinguished between personal possession and the actual sale and movement of narcotics, have extensive histories of drug consumption and lower self-esteem (Windsor & Dunlap, 2012). Such factors have vital implications for African American women who are relatively more likely than men to be homeless as well as have spousal and intimate relationship problems (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011).

Women are more likely to have child care responsibilities after serving their prison term than their male counterparts (Harding et al., 2011). When sharing their imprisonment and post-release experiences, African American women mention their responsibilities to their children more than men do (Harding et al., 2011). Lack of a good education and job training before their incarceration contribute to a life of poverty after release that makes it difficult for these women to live and raise their children in a good environment (Allspach, 2010). These factors also explain why African American women are typically involved in economically driven crimes such as property theft, prostitution, and drug-related offenses (Harding et al., 2011). Therefore, the post-release experiences of African American women caring for their children can present distinct reentry challenges in addition to the income and earning challenges for existence and survival (Fasula et al., 2013). Self-harm incidents and depression are common among women prisoners, and the time spent behind bars reportedly impacts their motherhood and related roles (Harding et al., 2011). They also often face problems in their social relationship and supports because they fall short in training, skills, education, housing, and abuse

alcohol or misuse drugs (Allspach, 2010). Because of these reasons, it is plausible that the most appropriate approach to study this phenomenon would be one that is gender sensitive (Allspach, 2010).

The pervasiveness of poverty, drug involvement, poor emotional and mental health, poor housing, homelessness, low or a lack of education resulting in low wage employment, unstructured temporary release, and overcrowded conditions negatively impact most ex-offenders including African American women after their release from prison because they are left with the bulk of child care duties as well as managing their homes with little or no help from their estranged significant others (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011). Some African American women who have spent time in the prison system have extensive records of criminal offenses, in that they are usually imprisoned for drug offending crimes and are prone to having long-term and serious problems regarding drugs (Nally, Lockwood, Ho, & Knutson, 2014). Such problems typically coexist with psychological health issues including a higher incidence of depression than the general population of offenders who experience reentry (Nally et al., 2014). Problems with personal finances, lack of job expertise, and a decline in health may result in higher rates of recidivism and relapse than other post-release populations (Gordon, Kinlock, Schwartz, Couvillion, & O'Grady, 2013). For those who are able to secure and maintain employment and livable wages, the risk of re-offense decreases (Gordon et al., 2013; Ryan, 2010).

There is also the issue of education and job training. The majority of African American women in state prisons across the United States do not have a high school



education (Nowotny, Masters, & Boardman, 2016). Many cannot read and write, making it difficult for them to benefit from whatever provision is available in the prison to have vocational training (Nowotny et al., 2016). For example, 41% of women enter prison with less than a GED, while nearly 22% of women enter prison with a high school diploma (Nowotny et al., 2016, p. 918). The Federal Second Chance Act of 2005 calls for expanding reentry services for people leaving prison; however, insufficient federal government funding for health care, child care, education, and job training programs has a serious negative impact on African American women and has fostered an increase in recidivism (Richards et al., 2012). Without the modification of federal and state policies to accommodate these programs, the recipients will continue to experience limited services to foster community reintegration and recidivism rate will continue to rise (Richards et al., 2012).

While previous researchers have indicated that African American women face challenges upon reentry into society following incarceration (Allspach, 2010; Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Gordon et al., 2013; Harding et al., 2011), previous research has not focused on the lived experiences of African American women who were incarcerated for drug offenses as they attempt to reenter society. Additionally, previous researchers have not focused on the specific challenges this group faces during the post-release period (Holzer, 2009). As such, most of the existing studies on the issue have focused more on men, with some forays into examining Whites (Wright, Dehart, & Koons-Witt, 2013). In this study, I sought to fill the gap in documenting the post-release experiences of those African American women who have served a prison term due to drug-related offenses

and have been released into the society. The results of this study will shed some light on reentry and highlight ways that it could be more productive and more successful for the African American women post incarceration.

### **Problem Statement**

The general problem was that African American women convicted for drug-related offenses face a crisis upon being released into their community after serving their prison terms (Woodall et al., 2013). The specific problem was that the cause of the crisis for these women upon reentry into society, in which they face the potential of recidivism for their crimes, was unknown (Holzer, 2009). Previous researchers have indicated a number of factors that affect all prisoners' reentry into society following release, such as obtaining and maintaining consistent employment (Gordon et al., 2013), childcare (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011), mental health issues (Harding et al., 2011), and a lack of social supports (Allspach, 2010). However, previous researchers have not specifically focused on the post-release experiences of African American women sentenced for drug offenses, instead focusing on the lived experiences of African American women during sentencing (Johnson, 1995) and their overall experiences of life before, during, and after incarceration (Henriques & Manatu-Rupert, 2001). Therefore, with this study, I set out to fill the gap in the literature by focusing on African American women offenders as they attempted to reenter their respective communities and faced common needs. By conducting this study, I hoped to bring out a comprehensive understanding of how these challenges impede reintegration in the metropolitan setting.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of convicted African American women who reentered the community to understand the challenges they face because of their potential for high recidivism rates. The results of this study contributed to the literature by providing African American women's perspectives to the challenges of reducing recidivism and stabilizing reentry processes. African American adults who volunteered to be participants for this research were between 18 to 55 years of age, as indicated in age description of an adult (King, 2012). I used a face-to-face interview process with open-ended questioning to explore and investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of the African American women participants post-release into the community. The qualitative approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' thoughts, perspectives, and viewpoints concerning in the community that creates an enabling environment to risky behavior leading to recidivism.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, I explored the lived experiences of the ex-convict African American women post-release into the community and the impact of social supports on recidivism. I developed the following central research question that guided this research study and three research sub questions to further explore the topic:

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of an African American woman who received, or did not receive, social supports after serving time for drug-related offenses in a large city in the northeastern United States?

Research Subquestion 1: What social supports were received, if any, post incarceration?

Research Subquestion 2: How did those social supports affect the reintegration into the community post-incarceration?

Research Subquestion 3: Which social support(s) do you believe affected the ability to reintegrate into the community post-incarceration?

### **Theoretical Framework and Foundations for the Study**

I drew on social support theory, presented by Cullen (1994), as the theoretical framework for this study. Social support is associated with how interaction helps people cope with stressful events and enhances their psychological well-being (Cullen, 1994). The social support theory was applied to this study to provide some insights into the factors that impact an ex-convict's reintegration into the community and their possible recidivism.

Social support distinguishes between four types of support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Emotional support is associated with sharing life experiences and involves the provision of empathy, love, trust, and caring (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Instrumental support involves the provision of tangible aid and services that directly assist a person in need and is provided by close friends, colleagues, and neighbors (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Informational support involves the provision of advice, suggestions, and information that a person can use to address problems (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Appraisal support involves the provision of

information that is useful for self-evaluation purposes, such as constructive feedback, affirmation, and social comparison (Fiedler & Mann, 2012).

Social relationships have a great impact on reentry and recidivism; closely related to social relationships are social integration, social network, and social support (Berkman et al., 2000). Social integration has been used to refer to the existence of social ties (Denney, Tewksbury, & Jones, 2014). Social support is one of the important functions of social relationships. Among all the barriers that impede successful reentry, such as poor education, obtaining and maintaining employment, stable housing, and transportation, none compares with poor social support (Denney et al., 2014).

Social support can be measured as the perception that an individual has assistance available, the actual received assistance, or the degree to which a person is integrated in a social network (Cullen, 1994; Denney et al., 2014). Support can come from many sources, such as family, friends, pets, neighbors, coworkers, organizations, and so forth. Government-provided social support is often referred to as public aid. This theory was relevant to my study because research has shown a direct correlation between an incarcerated person and the community to which they are released to and the available resources in that community (see Hlavka et al., 2015).

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a qualitative, phenomenological, descriptive design to conduct interviews with 14 African American women with a prior conviction in drug-related offenses who resided in a large mid-Atlantic city and were between the ages of 18 to 55 years old. Convenience-based sampling was used to recruit volunteer participants (see Shosha,

2012). Participants were required to have been released from incarceration and living in the community between 6 months to 5 years. I used Colaizzi's seven-step strategy for data analysis, which had been used in prior research for human behaviors and lived experiences and proved successful (see Moustakas, 1994). My rationale for the selection of a small participant pool, including the age bracket, was based on the recommendation that phenomenological researchers consider sample sizes between 10 to 15 participants (see Simon & Goes, 2011). According to Simon and Goes (2011), the use of a small participant pool allows for an in-depth analysis and knowledge of the viewpoints of the participants from the data. This method allowed me to organize the data collection process from the interview into themes and trends for the possible interpretation and synthesis of the interview responses.

Simon and Goes (2011) argued that a phenomenological approach provides knowledge relating to the perceptions and views of adults, which when applied to this study, allowed me to gather the participants' experiences generated after their release from incarceration and back into the community and may influence recidivism. In addition, the use of a qualitative phenomenological method approach afforded me the opportunity to define the research methodology, data collection process, study analysis, and my role as the researcher conducting the study. Therefore, I used a phenomenological method to study the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants relating to the target construct or research respondents. The goal of phenomenological research is to provide a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals and not to describe a grand theory or develop a model

but to describe accurately a person's lived experience in relation to what is being studied (Morrisey, 2011). Using the phenomenological design, I achieved my study construct and concepts through in-depth, one-on-one interviews of the study participants.

Once eligibility and inclusion criteria were established and participants contacted me through posted bulletin flyers at public local areas such as community food bank bulletin board or the parking lot of a local church with a high percentage of the targeted population, I scheduled an appointment for face-to-face interviews with the participants at a location of their choosing or at a private room in the local library where participants felt safe to discuss their intimate issues about their situation. I obtained permission to post flyers from the community food bank manager or the church pastor, before the flyers were posted. No interview was conducted at a workplace or in near sight. I gave high consideration to the privacy and comfort of the participants when scheduling the interview location.

Before the interviews, I provided each participant with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, and the minimal benefits and risks. I let them know that I was interested in those factors that helped them stay out of prison as well as factors that threatened their stay out without discussing the risky ventures they may have been involved in. I did, however, let them know that should they discuss specific criminal behavior with me I was duty bound to get law enforcement agents involved. Before starting the interview, I also obtained consent verbally as well as in writing by using the informed consent letter. I also provided participants with my National Institute of Health (NIH) Research Certificate.

In the interviews, I used the open-ended interview protocol to explore the perspectives and experiences of the participants relating to their post-release experiences, the barriers and challenges they faced in their reentry, and recidivism. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded after I obtained consent to record, and as a backup measure in case of equipment failures, I hand wrote the interview responses in a journal. Participants were provided with a \$5 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time. Participants were not required to return the gift card even if they withdrew or did not complete the study. Participants were informed that they could also withdraw from the study at any time for no cause or reason. I also conducted a follow-up interview of 10 to 15 minutes in length with participants to clarify any concerns and responses after all data were analyzed, verified, and transcribed. This follow up was required for data triangulation and is known as member checking. I also forwarded a 1–2-page summary of the interview results, written in nontechnical language, to the participants by e-mail or postal mail.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

For the purpose of this study on the perspectives and experiences of the effects of post-incarceration of African American women residing in the community, I used the following terms:

*Drug offending*: The illicit trade of drugs, which involves activities such as drug possession, sale, distribution, manufacturing, and cultivation of prohibited substances. It is also regarded as a “crime of weight” because for as long as the offender carries more than the legally allowed weight, they can go to jail (Swanson, 2006).



*Post-release experience:* Post-release experience refers to the time period in which a formerly incarcerated individual returns to his or her community after serving a court-mandated sentence (Trotter & Sheehan, 2017).

*Recidivism:* The act of a person repeating an undesirable behavior after they have either experienced negative consequences of that behavior or have been treated or trained to extinguish that behavior. It is also used to refer to the percentage of former prisoners who violated their paroles, supervised release, or who are rearrested for a similar offense (Henslin, 2008).

*Social influence:* The perception of the consumers of the benefit of the utilization of technology by significant others. It is also defined as the actions, reactions, and thoughts of an individual that are influenced by other people or groups. Social influence may be represented by peer pressure, persuasion, marketing, sales, and conformity (Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2012).

### **Assumptions**

In this study, I assumed that ex-prisoners faced hardships during prison time, which impacted their psychological and economic well-being. Another assumption was that African Americans face historical biases and prejudices in the process of criminal justice system, in prison, and in society. I also assumed that participants were willing to speak openly and willingly about their experiences in prison as well as their experiences post-release. Finally, I assumed that the participants understood the questions asked to them and were forthcoming with their responses.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this research study was confined to African American women who were convicted for drug offending and completed their prison sentences and were currently residing in the community without any form of supervision. This enabled me to control the research with a sizable sample. The delimitations of the study included the use of drug offending as the crime of focus, which was chosen due to the high probability of repeat offense (see Binswanger, 2011). My focus was on African American women, between the ages 18 to 55 years old, who had served time in correctional facilities, and lived in the large mid-Atlantic city.

The study was also delimited by researching prior drug-related convicted African American women within the large mid-Atlantic city in the United States, with the utilization of convenience-based sampling restricted to an ethnic group. Groups such as children or nonconvicted individuals of any related drug offense were not used in the study. Participant interviews were limited to a sample of 14 members. According to Simon and Goes (2011), a phenomenological study should consider sample sizes of five to 25 participants for an in-depth analysis and understanding of the lived experiences of the subjects.

One boundary of this study was the fact I interviewed participants by the use of a telephone-recorded means, Skype, or face-to-face. The participants were randomly recruited from a public area of the community, such as a house of worship (church) or a community food bank anywhere in the city. The demographic location was also a delimitation within the study.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was that the sample participants were made up of African American women. The limitations of this study included a small sample size due to lack of willingness to participate on behalf of potential participants. Other limitations that applied to this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study included time, financial resources, and locale management for obtaining a representative population.

Moreover, the convenience-based sample of 14 African American women may not have consistently represented the broad spectrum of the perceptions of women in other parts of the city, the United States, or the world. Since the gaps in current and relevant qualitative research studies noted a lack of research on African American women, Wong (2012) recommended that various ethnicities should be examined to design and implement effective recidivism prevention programs for convicted drug offenders. This however, was ameliorated through a few methods.

The outcomes of the study and the data collection were subject to researcher bias given that I am based in the city in which the research was conducted and the participants interviewed were also based there. My profession as a lawyer also affirmed the potential for bias in this study (see Simon & Goes, 2011). I eliminated moderator bias by being as neutral as possible, using neutral body language and voice tone and not offering any opinion. Biased questions were eliminated in that I avoided leading an ambiguous question and coaching the participants in any way or speaking for them and strictly used the semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol.

After the interviews, I sought clarifications from the participants, realizing that memories do fail. I eliminated biased samples by conducting a proper screening of participants so that those picked truly represented the target segment. I avoided biased reporting by keeping an open mind, striving for objectivity as much as possible. Finally, for reasonable measures to address the identified limitations, I adhered to the parameters identified within the scope of the study by making sure that the population sample selections for this study did not include participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria.

### **Significance of the Study**

My study is significant in that I sought to fill the gap in previous research on post-release African American women who served prison time in the large mid-Atlantic city and residing in the community. This type of study is a rarity in its emphasis on this city due to its diversified ethnic population, most especially for African-American women, as well as my use of convenience-based sampling. Present and future researchers will be able to benefit from this research study because it combines theories from African American and criminal justice studies.

My research about African American women ex-convicts is important because it offers a qualitative analysis of previous researchers' works on a historically deprived population. Most of the previous studies explored the post-release experiences of African American men under a narrow perspective, focusing on health complications and unemployment problems. In this study, I went a little further to focus on those territories that past studies have ignored, including the effect on the participants' children, housing,

relationships with significant others, and available communal and governmental assistance.

The findings of this study contribute to positive social change by providing insights into the views and perceptions of African American women and how they are affected by the post-release factors that include the conviction for drug offenses and recidivism. The findings and results of this study further provide a form of benefit to the public through information and, therefore, could lead to a positive social change in the reduction of recidivism of convicted individuals, specifically African American women. Possible dissemination of this study will be to the public, behavioral and health services personnel, policy makers and administrators, parents, families, schools, libraries, drug rehab facilities, individuals with drug offenses convictions, the criminal justice systems, and social and behavioral sciences journals.

### **Summary**

In this study, I evaluated the post-release experiences of African American women who were incarcerated for drug offending in a prison in the large mid-Atlantic city, had been released, and were currently residing in the community without any form of supervision. The purpose of this research was to shed more light on the challenges that confront African American women after their release from prison as well as to examine the available help that can serve as encouragement to avoid recidivism once released. In addition, the results of this study provide evidence-based suggestions for future provisions and policies to be set in place towards the achievement of a positive and favorable after-prison experience.

In Chapter 1 of this study, I outlined the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 will include a comprehensive review of the extant literature pertaining to the post-release experiences of African American women in the United States. This review will also include an overview of the various factors contributing to difficulties during post-release experiences as well as the theoretical framework, which I will discuss at length in the chapter.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will highlight problems and challenges faced by female African Americans released from state correctional facilities. The prisoners' profiles signify that most of the offenders imprisoned for drug-related offenses are young, uneducated, urban women with a low socioeconomic status (Austin, Jacobsen, & Chettiar, 2013). Other similarities noted include engagement in drug-offending activities, unstable and disturbed family backgrounds, and, sometimes, psychiatric and mental health issues (Campbell, 2011; Fasula et al., 2013; Hubbard, 2012). I will review earlier studies to provide an outline of challenges faced by African American women who served prison time for drug offending, addressing problems of mental health and substance abuse, employment search, and securing suitable accommodations that are noted to be most barriers to ex-convicts as they seek to be reintegrated into society (see Hubbard, 2012). In Chapter 2, I also discuss literature search strategies, theoretical foundations, and prominent research concepts.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I obtained the literature compiled for this review through comprehensive online library search methods. I used Walden University's library services to determine the best search methodology and help generate ideas regarding keywords to search. Among the journal databases searched, those that generated the most applicable results were Phoenix, Proquest, EBSCO, and Questia. I also accessed other databases in the search process, such as Google Scholar, Scholar Works, and Academic Premier as well as peer-

reviewed journals to ensure that all of the literature generated accommodated this designation. I reviewed 136 documents extensively that included journal articles, books, and dissertations ranging from publication dates of 2008 to 2015 year and generated a magnitude of research that revealed significant issues and concerns regarding African American women, drug-related offenses, and recidivism. Using key word and phrase searches, I found current literature containing empirical research in the relevant areas, which appeared in a wide range of publications, such as *Journal of Civil Rights and Economic Development*, *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*, *Women & Criminal Justice*, and *Journal of Experimental Criminology*.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

Schumaker and Brownell (1984) stated that the theory of social support is an exchange of resources between two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient. The theorists further affirmed that the sharing of resources within supportive association decreases the risk of offense and other personal pathologies by reinforcing and building internal defenses within the individual (Schumaker & Brownell, 1984). Polakowski (1994) stated that influences link the individualistic approach to prosocial opportunities and activities by offering resources which permit ex-prisoners to overcome hardships through noncriminal methods.

In addition, these concepts are reinforced through empirical evidence, which indicated that social support is inversely associated to individual criminal acts (Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Chavis, 1990). Social support and relational theory jointly



propose that networks of social support are vital for women in general and are fundamental in decreasing risk of engagement in offending conduct and behavior (Perkins et al., 1990). On the other hand, women ex-prisoners often live and grow up in conditions where networks of social support are either highly dysfunctional or lacking and do not foster optimistic relationships (Clear, 2007).

Qualitative research is indicative and should not be marked by any preconceptions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). I provided the rationale for the purpose of each interview question in alignment to each research question and theories that are associated with this descriptive phenomenological qualitative study in the Introduction. Deeper understanding will be achieved through the interviewing process by investigating and exploring the perspectives, lived experiences, and viewpoints of the African American women who have had prior convictions on drug-related offenses and served prison time but are now residing in the community without any form of supervision.

### **Key Concepts Extracted From Literature**

Over the past 200 years, several researchers have noted the transitions in punishment that have taken place in Western countries. The U.S. criminal justice system is often categorized as biased, particularly when it comes to ethnic and racial minority groups (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 2013). Conversely, researchers have asserted that the aim of the criminal justice system is to rehabilitate offenders rather than punish them for their crimes (Hubbard, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of the prison in society has changed from essentially a holding institution originally used for punishing the offender to constituting the sentence and penalty (Taylor et al., 2013). The prison system of a

nation is a culturally engendered process, which is formed by prevailing attitudes, moral values, political, and social factors (Taylor et al., 2013).

Certainly, several commentators have observed this culturally-shaped product as a key measure of the culture under consideration. In brief, the temper and mood of the populace, with respect to the treatment of offenders and the offense, is among the major unflinching tests of a country's civilization (Fuller, 2013; Meyer et al., 2013). The support and criticism of offenders in a society provide a barometer for ideological discussion prevalent within the community, signifying that the criminal justice system has faced this criticism throughout history (Enos, 2012). Incarceration is now the chosen punishment form and is often depicted as a last resort. All options and substitutes for noncustodial sanctions that are made available for nonserious offenses such as fines, community service, and probation are based on the accessibility of incarceration as an enforcement tool (Enos, 2012).

### **African American Women and the Criminal Justice System**

Historically, the U.S. criminal justice system has not treated African American men fairly, and this is a well-known and well-documented fact. While the experiences of African American men have been the subject of substantial analysis, there has been not much documentation about the experiences of their female counterparts in the American criminal justice system (Golden, 2013). Therefore, in this study, I focused on the lived experiences of African American women who had served a term in prison and were released and residing in the community. Without going through the direct route to find out about what they have been through from the women themselves, it would have been

difficult to ascertain exactly the documented facts because the relevant statistics are usually grouped together. Thus, when race has been used, care has not been taken to separate them by gender.

According to Gordon et al. (2013), women's incarceration rates have significantly increased in recent times, particularly for drug-related crimes. From the years 1999 to 2008, the imprisonment of women for drug offending increased by 19% as compared to men, which showed an increase of only 10% (Gordon et al., 2013). Moreover, women inmates are more likely than males to have records of sexual and physical abuse (Gordon et al., 2013). Since 2004, approximately 73% of females in state prison, compared to 55% of male prisoners, encountered a psychological illness or obtained treatment for psychological problems (Gordon et al., 2013). Such facts demonstrate the effects from imprisonment are different with women and are experienced differently by women inmates (Gordon et al., 2013).

### **Challenges Faced by Female African American Ex-Prisoners**

There are numerous contributing factors to the hurdles African American women face when returning home after serving prison time for drug offending (Staton-Tindall, Havens, Oser, & Burnett, 2011). These difficulties include unemployment, housing, and proper reintegration; at the most basic extent, the challenge faced is monetary. If an ex-offender is financially stable, there will be no housing problem (Staton-Tindall et al., 2011). Prior to incarceration, most female prisoners worked as low-wage earners with fewer legal means to secure desirable accommodation. African American female criminals encounter similar economic and social conditions that lead to housing

problems, but they also deal with additional hurdles because of the incarcerated period (Staton-Tindall et al., 2011).

Convicted females who are on parole or probation are easily subjected to conditions that limit their abilities to lead more stable lives in certain geographical areas or housing communities. For instance, an ex-prisoner may not be allowed to reintegrate into society or return home to a spouse who has developed an aversion to them (Golden, 2013). When in custody, women inmates are subjected to rigid controls, but as they reintegrate into the home setting, they do not face the same restrictions on drugs (Golden, 2013). Therefore, friends and family members usually find it difficult to accept ex-convicts back into the same home from which they previously departed. Moreover, because of their incarceration, few ex-prisoners find themselves eligible for housing programs offered by the government (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Each state has different limitations and restrictions to the extent that the federal law excludes drug and sex offenders from government-funded housing programs (Fiedler & Mann, 2012).

### **Barriers to Employment**

Women prisoners who were previously involved in drug offenses face considerable challenges and are subsequently economically marginalized when they return to society (Brown, 2012). Female ex-prisoners who are jobless and/or underemployed usually work for less pay and fewer hours than men (Brown, 2012). These women usually work on a temporary basis and in entry or low-level positions that afford less growth and progress or increase their potential (Brown, 2012). Brown (2012) compared 435 female inmates and 1,220 male inmates who were incarcerated for drug

offending in a metropolitan prison and found that female inmates were considerably less likely to have skills, trades, or professions and that they were more likely to account for having low income in the first 30 days after completing prison time. Further results showed that 30% of women in metropolitan correctional facilities had at least a high school diploma as compared to 25% of men in the same type of correctional facilities (Brown, 2012). In addition, most of the female ex-prisoners in the study lacked vocational skills and education to compete in the U.S. labor market, thereby exacerbating their situations post-release (Brown, 2012).

Studies have shown that a significant portion of imprisoned women suffered cases of severe abuse (Richie, 2012). Those who experienced trauma during childhood are more likely to suffer from psychological issues and poor problem-solving and coping skills (Richie, 2012). Posttraumatic stress disorder and depression are found within this population as well (Golden, 2013; Richie, 2012). Imprisoned women tend to have a greater probability of engaging in criminal acts, substance abuse, and prostitution and are more likely to be afflicted with sexually transmitted diseases and eating disorders, especially after incarceration (Cobbina, Huebner, & Berg, 2012).

Homelessness is one of the serious challenges faced during the post-release experience of African American women ex-prisoners. Some studies have found the range of homelessness rates of this population between 25% to more than 50%, with some reported rates as high as 95% in certain cases (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2012). Health issues are another factor causing a setback for this population of women. Many of these women often suffer from poor health conditions, in part as they do not have adequate

access to health facilities (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2012). Fiedler and Mann (2012) theorized that access to support services and programs is a major obstacle and impediment to employment after serving prison time.

Educational disadvantages are another contributing factor to this population's unemployment. Female ex-prisoners tend to have inadequate educational backgrounds; Farkas (2011) found that African Americans who served prison time for drug offending are less educated, with only 51% holding a GED or high school diploma compared to 76% of the general population. Seventy percent of women ex-prisoners, in contrast to 50% of the general population, lacked the ability to successfully complete mathematic calculations or read at any functional level sufficient to solve a billing disagreement or understand a schedule of train (Farkas, 2011).

Previous literature on African American women ex-prisoners determined that at least 40% of imprisoned women dropped out of school after incarceration (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011). Additionally, Bellair and Kowalski postulated that female ex-prisoners are deficient in oral and written skills, math, and reading. They further postulated that their reading skills are between fifth- and seventh-grade level, when compared to their nondelinquent peers. African American ex-prisoners also tend to have lower academic and intellectual functioning (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011).

Both women and men drug offenders have considerably lower achievement scores in mathematics as compared to nondelinquents and considerably lower verbal skills (as evidenced by a high proportion of grammatical mistakes in their verbal communication; Putniņš, 1999). Many female ex-prisoners also have cognitive shortages in creative

thinking and limited problem-solving skills, mental retardation, and learning disabilities (Hamilton, Schneider, Kane, & Jordan, 2015). This population suffers from other post-release problems, such as behavioral and emotional disorders and/or disabilities that eventually impede their ability to fully reintegrate into the community (Harner & Riley, 2013).

A reason for these post-release problems might be partly because this population is deficient in the social skills required to effectively interrelate or interact suitably with their coworkers and superiors (Meyer et al., 2013; Woodall, Dixey, & South, 2013). Current criminal records have a direct effect on employment opportunities. Business organizations are often unwilling to recruit ex-prisoners because of perceived risks of ongoing involvement in illegal behavior along with a severe lack of trust of ex-convicts. Moreover, many employers fear potential assertions of negligent hiring and/or retention in the event of the company's failure to carry out a behavioral investigation of ex-convicts (Meyer et al., 2013).

Even though Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbids companies from discriminating against a person from employment because of an individual's criminal record, several exemptions exist nonetheless (Salazar, 2012). Both Congress and state legislatures have endorsed laws that restrict ex-prisoners from employment through restrictions of certification and licensure in about 350 jobs (Salazar, 2012). Such occupations consist of real estate, accounting, childcare, cosmetology, unionized trade occupations, and positions within the medical field (Salazar, 2012).

The situation became especially adverse following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, which intensified issues for internal security and as such culminated and translated into an endemic promulgation of new laws necessitating background and criminal records verifications regarding applications for professional occupations (Salazar, 2012). Transportation of vulnerable populations such as the elderly and children became an impossible form of employment for ex-convicts (Salazar, 2012). Society usually disregards the nature of the ex-convict's crime, the amount of time between the imprisonment and present, and/or the individual's ability to rehabilitate and transform his/her life around. Such employment restrictions are binding for ex-prisoners and pose certain concerns for African American women (Salazar, 2012).

Since women ex-prisoners usually have little experience and minimum skills, limited occupations in the food service industries, cosmetology, child, and home health care professions might be the only opportunities appropriate and available for them. On the other hand, due to exclusions against obtaining jobs that require a higher level of skills such as accounting, nursing, and unionized trades, females may not advance from service and caregiving positions into occupations that are more likely to offer better living benefits and wages (Meyer et al., 2013). Despite vocational training programs in correctional organizations that emphasize businesses like barbering and cosmetology as possible means of employment post-release, some states statutorily ban ex-prisoners from such fields (Woodall et al., 2013).

Even though such limitations could keep ex-prisoners from seeking employment, there are other obstacles to securing employment. Companies conduct inquiries into



potential employees' backgrounds and criminal records, even at the application phase. This practice has resulted into the "ban the box" movement, which looks to eradicate questions associated with convictions on preliminary job application forms; thus, this factor alone is insufficient to automatically characterize ex-convicts as ineligible for employment. Consequently, new guidelines and principles have been passed at the city, county, and state levels to encourage and support equal practices of human resources policy for hiring and retention purposes.

Meyer et al. (2013) contended that this movement would not have the desired effect because adequate information regarding how businesses use information about criminal records and history and possible impact when ex-prisoners are recruited may result in the non-recruitment of the ex-convict. Additionally, other studies explored 619 companies in California and determined that some businesses favor recruiting ex-convicts due to the rehabilitation that these citizens had been through because they had served their time and paid their debt to society (Binswanger et al., 2011). This demonstrates that some companies make a conscious effort in making knowledgeable and strategic decisions based on the substance of an individual's complete background rather than relying on a criminal record alone.

Job prospects for almost all African American women who served prison time usually involve low wage jobs (Hamilton et al., 2015). Even for the more experienced and skillful women of this population, the ability to secure a professional means of employment seems challenging due to the role these women play as primary caregivers within families that may not be financially solvent (Trotter & Sheehan, 2017). In

addition, this issue is further compounded by expectations of school systems, child protective services, and family court that consistently advocate for the interest of the children (Golden, 2013). Female ex-convicts with disabled children and/or infants have especially complex situations because the resource programs for disabled children are historically underfunded (Golden, 2013). Consequently, such opportunities are not easy to come by for these ex-convicts, hence another impediment to prospective permanent employment.

Traditionally, the concept of public well-being referred to a safety net to support and stabilize families in this process of reintegration; however, this has transformed during recent years. In most states, former women prisoners with drug offending records who are ineligible for parole or probation often face many barriers to access public support benefits such as public housing, social security, and food stamps (Anderson, Nava, & Cortez, 2018). African American women who do not have financial support or are not financially independent may continue the recidivism cycle (Hunter & Greer, 2011).

Researchers and policy makers often assert that successful reintegration of female ex-prisoners necessitates employment opportunities for this population. This conviction is clear by both the near universal requirements and several programs directed at enhancing African American women's ability to undertake employment within society. Enos's study (2012) demonstrated a clear association between recidivism and employment. The study showed that having employment with appropriate pay would likely stem the probability of this population re-engaging in criminal activities.

The significance of gainful employment on ex-convicts' effective reintegration is clear in various ways (Enos, 2012). Most African American women who served prison time for drug offending leave prison with little or no savings and lower levels of support from friends or family members (Enos, 2012). Thus, the accessibility of reasonable employment opportunities may be understood as the disparity between recidivism and becoming a responsible member of the society even though psychosomatic advantages of maintaining and obtaining an employment are not often examined in the literature regarding ex-prisoners' reintegration into society. Regardless of the important role employment plays in the successful reintegration of offenders within the community, there is the convincing proof that ex-prisoners do not receive good wages in the labor market.

Administrative data and micro surveys information signified that African American women ex-convicts have comparatively low rates of employment with lesser salaries than White ex-convicted women with similar demographic traits (Enos, 2012). *Demand-side* and *supply-side* are two factors that contribute to the challenges ex-prisoners encounter when making efforts to reenter the job market. Demand-side implies the employers' willingness to hire an employee who has a criminal record. On the other hand, supply-side indicates the individual factors and traits of ex-convicts, which affect their employability, such as lack of education or inadequate job skills.

### **Factors of Supply-Side**

It is clear that ex-prisoners lack the skills essential to compete for employment, and most African American women lack education, which shrinks the number of

employment opportunities available to them (Enos, 2012). Corroborating this, Richards et al. (2012) reported that more than 40% of imprisoned African American women did not have a GED or had not completed high school when compared to the general populace, which was 18%. Furthermore, the lack of education is inexplicably higher among ex-prisoners suffering from physical and mental health issues, which negatively impact re-entering society and the labor market (Richards et al., 2012). The study also revealed that approximately 21% of all ex-prisoners' report having health conditions that restrict their work abilities.

Conversely, some researchers proposed that effective programs intended to combat such challenges have significant potential to improve ex-prisoners' opportunities of enhancing the community's and family's well-being so that offenders could return at the end of the prison time (Richards et al., 2012). Governmental restrictions are significant obstacles preventing ex-offenders from attaining postsecondary degrees. In 1994, the federal government passed a law prohibiting anyone incarcerated in a federal or state penal institution of drug charges from being awarded a Pell Grant, despite evidence showed that postsecondary education helps to reduce recidivism (Stevens & Ward, 1997). Further, rules governing federal financial aid place restrictions on access for drug offenders. A first-time drug offender is barred from financial aid eligibility for 1 year, and a third-time drug offender is barred for life (Heinrich, 2000).

It is unclear whether ex-prisoners who return to metropolitan areas are more unprepared to penetrate the job market as compared to those who seek to reenter rural areas. This is because the job market is comparatively rigid and highly competitive in

metropolitan areas; employees must possess high levels of skill to obtain employment in the metropolitan job market. Studies also suggest that urban ex-prisoners are more impacted by factors like mental health and substance abuse (Harding et al., 2011).

Another factor is lack of adequate education and Harding et al. (2011) showed that about 19% of the working-age urban population did not complete high school or its equivalent degree. Furthermore, about 15% of the working-age population in metropolitan areas did not complete high school or equivalent (Brown, 2012). Such results suggest that convicts released from urban prisons have fewer skills required to effectively compete in the labor market (Brown, 2012; Harding et al., 2011).

### **Factors of Demand-Side**

It is imperative to take into consideration how ex-prisoners' characteristics affect employability. It is similarly significant to take into consideration employment demands for this audience. Farkas (2011) examined the stigma associated with imprisonment that makes it complex for ex-inmates to find gainful employment. In order to examine whether criminal background impacts employment of women who were former prisoners, Farkas employed a survey approach to four major metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, Detroit, Boston, and Atlanta. Results found that most of the employers are not willing to recruit people who had a criminal history or any association with drug offending even though federal law prohibits discrimination against hiring of ex-convicts (Farkas, 2011).

The findings of the Farkas's (2011) study indicated that 38% of the potential companies examined might consider recruiting ex-prisoners. In addition, 32% asserted that their company consistently checks employees' backgrounds; however, another 17%

do not conduct criminal background investigations on a consistent basis. Farkas noted the employers that are most likely to conduct criminal background investigations are also the same companies that probably refuse employment to ex-prisoners. Further findings of this research revealed that all ex-prisoners were at a disadvantage when they entered the labor market. Companies frequently obtain information regarding potential employees by obtaining a criminal history or background check.

In contrast, several employers and companies do not make use of criminal history or background checks on consistent basis. For example, research found that roughly 62% of future employers might not consider recruiting ex-prisoners who were incarcerated for drug offending (Richards et al., 2012). This contrasts with the 32% that is accounted for using consistent criminal record checks; it is likely that most of the companies reported mistakenly have women ex-prisoners on their payroll (Richards et al., 2012). The difficulty associated with gaining employment among female African American ex-convicts in metropolitan areas resulted in part from employers within the urban setting because urban employers are more likely to be big companies with many employees. The state in which this large city is located is one of the states that allows employers to refuse to hire ex-convicts when there is a direct relationship between the offense and the job, or when hiring the person would create an unreasonable risk to property or safety (Richards et al., 2012).

### **Employment Discrimination on the Basis of Criminal Convictions**

It can be difficult for those with a criminal record of any kind to find employment. Many employers believe that once a person has been convicted of a crime, that person

will always be unreliable (Denver, Siwach, & Bushway, 2017). Even employers in low-risk industries tend not to hire applicants with criminal records (Denver et al., 2017). This type of discrimination fails to account for the many people who learn from their mistakes. To varying degrees, employers may legally consider a worker's criminal history as part of the application process (Denver et al., 2017; Hamilton et al., 2015).

There are no federal laws that explicitly prohibit employment discrimination based on a criminal record (Denver et al., 2017). However, there are some limits on how much a criminal record may be considered. Several states have enacted laws that prohibit arbitrary bans on employment applicants with criminal convictions. These laws may prohibit a public employer from denying employment to an applicant solely based on a prior conviction or prohibit a public employer from denying employment where there is no reasonable relationship between the conviction and the employment sought (Allspach, 2010).

A few states, such as the state in which this research study was conducted, prohibit all employers from denying employment based on a criminal record unless there is a direct relationship between the offense and the job, or unless hiring the person would create an unreasonable risk to property or safety. This particularly affects urban convicts who would likely compete for jobs after completing their incarcerations for drug offending. Allspach (2010) found that most low-skilled jobs in metropolitan areas are in the service industries, which are staffed by companies most plentiful in urban setting yet least eager to recruit ex-prisoners.

### **Metropolitan Job Market**

In addition to demand-side and supply-side factors, some common aspects of metropolitan job markets further intensify the complexities ex-offenders experience in finding jobs in urban communities (Allspach, 2010). However, rural and urban areas undergo the same level of joblessness, but with differences in the salaries between employees of the two settings (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Fiedler and Mann (2012) reported that mean earnings per year in 2009 in nonmetropolitan areas were 21% lower when compared to metropolitan areas. Unsurprisingly, urban employees were less likely than rural employees to secure employment opportunities with lower pay. In brief, urban workers earn more than rural ones and there is no rationale to consider that this trend is different for ex-prisoners (Fiedler & Mann, 2012).

From a perspective of prisoner reintegration, the ability to obtain employment is vital. However, the ability to maintain a job that offers a good salary is much more difficult to achieve. Enos (2012) noted that decreases in salary result in increases in criminal activities and illegal earnings and approximated that a 10% increase in salaries results in a 10% decrease in recidivism rates. Based on the reality of the urban job market, large ratios of ex-prisoners were not being able to find employment that offered decent salaries, thereby returning to illicit activities such as drug offending to increase income or as an alternate means of income (Enos, 2012).

### **Lack of Support From Community and Family Members**

It has been established that one of the challenges ex-offenders face occurs when they come back home to the family (Harding et al., 2011). Family members and other



close relations may be essential to successful integrations to the community after imprisonment, as these associations offer both social support and control that could prevent the perpetuation of future illegal activities. Ex-offenders without positive social support and control from family members are more likely to end up indulging in immoral behaviors and activities. Nonetheless, not all family members offer a functional or positive environment. Harding et al. (2011) warned that families of ex-prisoner's post-release may also find themselves engaging in illegal activities or they may have been the catalyst for the previous crimes and unlikely to offer support in decreasing recidivism. This is especially significant regarding women ex-offenders whose relationships to their spouses or husbands was the key cause of their criminal behavior.

According to Harding et al. (2011), the path to incarceration for a number of women consisted of drug offending for boyfriends or with family members who had previous histories of negligence or victimization (Harding et al., 2011). Research by Harding et al. (2011), determined that a romantic relationship with offenders was a key contribution for women involved in drug offending. Even though families offer vital support to ex-convicts' post-release, such relationships are difficult and have the possibility of becoming more complex when female ex-convicts return, due to fear of past harms and complexities of reintegration.

In the process of reintegration, the role of family is imperative as it helps in assisting informal social controls such as interpersonal relationships that associate ex-prisoners with communities, families, law-abiding neighbors, and churches. This expansion to a larger network of society permits a person to build the social capital

required to thrive in the long run. Most ex-prisoners find employment by such social networks because they are unsuccessful in finding jobs otherwise. Moreover, social capital accessed by such social networks, including access to education and training along with emotional, social, and instrumental support, may be leveraged towards the positive development of human capital to attain new knowledge and skills (Harding et al., 2011).

According to Campbell (2011), female ex-convicts usually have less human and social capital than other post-release convicts to build their personal confidence. This is especially apparent when ex-prisoners return to society where a disproportionate percentage of the populace have come under the control of the criminal justice system resulting in the disruption of the relationship bonds, ultimately decreasing overall social capital. Those who have reliance on people with limited means eventually become socially isolated (Campbell, 2011).

Woodall et al. (2013) investigated the accessibility of social capital among 402 women under community supervision, focusing specifically on self-reported size of social networks that measures their overall support, such as instrumental support and emotional support, together with characteristics of demographics, social support, and social networks. Results determined that African American women with lower educational achievement received less support and had fewer social networks (Woodall et al., 2013). Additionally, female ex-prisoners with same size social networks are more likely to receive instrumental and positive social support. Women ex-prisoners who earn

less than \$8,000 per year received less social support when compared to females who earned over \$8,000 per year (Woodall et al., 2013).

Hunter and Greer (2011) revealed that those who challenge the social network and attempt to shift away from it experience resistance or ridicule because their acts depress group cohesion. Hence, social networks may both promote success through human and social capital or dishearten those involved in different ideas and activities (Hunter & Greer, 2011; Woodall et al.). Salazar (2012) explored the experiences of female African American ex-convicts who had been incarcerated for drug offending. By using a model of social and human capital, 313 women ex-prisoners, Salazar determined that comprehensive human and social capital factors are required to address the problem faced by women ex-prisoners. Specifically, the researcher observed that both self-efficacy and familial support scales evaluating disagreement in the origin's family were associated with a financial and employment needs scale (Salazar, 2012). Two measures of employment are whether a person had a job before incarceration and/or the presence of job obstacles over the previous 3 years. Financial needs constitute whether the individual has a bank account or a car, was ever on financial assistance, and whether the individual has been homeless.

The result of Salazar's (2012) study signified female ex-prisoners with lower self-confidence receiving little or no support from family members had greater issues in maintaining employment and financial independence and such factors are associated with recidivism (Salazar, 2012). Additionally, support calls for the use of holistic methods that serve the totality of an individual's needs: mental health and substance abuse

treatment, family support, relationship counseling, education, and housing. Since, the issues are comprehensive, complex and multiplicative, the solutions must be similar.

Studies conducted by Meyer et al. (2013) focused on the impact of imprisonment of African American women on their children and referenced long-term alienation and a distrust of affection, which usually arises in adulthood. In child development, bonding and attachment with mothers is a basic psychological step for a child. The results of Meyer et al.'s study depicted that mothers' involvement in drug-offending crimes decreased the level of trust among their children, and thus resulted in lower levels of engagement during the post-release period. Conversely, the troubles and problems during the imprisonment of African American women with children are quite different.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997 as cited in Meyer et al., 2013) consents to the termination of parental rights of women over their children if the women have been imprisoned for crimes such as drug offending due to the argument that women who engaged in crime are not able or competent enough to raise a child who could benefit society. Meyer et al. (2013) contended that most imprisoned women spent at least 18 months in incarceration and, therefore, their parental rights should be terminated. Consequently, during the post-release experience, they may not be united with their children (Meyer et al., 2013). At the time of release from prison, African American women often engage in self-assessment and self-evaluation regarding custody of their children. As a result, most imprisoned women worry about the stability or quality of care at the time regarding their children's lifestyle and future living arrangements (Meyer et al., 2013).

**Lack of Skills in Time Management**

An effective navigation of personal and family responsibility as well as other priorities frequently depends on the individual's time management skills. Research conducted by Hubbard (2012) showed how women transitioning from prison to society managed their time as well as how these factors impacted their reintegration goals. These reintegration goals included attaining stable housing, applying for social services, obtaining identification, and going to recovery meetings as well as having regular contact with supervision officers and reunification with the family. Hubbard examined self-reported time journals, where in-depth interviews of 34 women who reentered society after completing prison time for drug offending were conducted. Hubbard determined that even though employment was a significant objective, it was the most insignificant preference for these women.

Despite that most of the African American women polled in Hubbard's (2102) research were unemployed, many of them were not actively seeking job opportunities when the study was conducted. The researchers found that poor time management of the women contributed to their inability to secure employment. As a result, their daily schedules often included increased flexibility and free time coupled with lack of accommodation and control, which contributed to the women's problems, particularly when appointments were planned by other individuals to meet with a provider's timetable (Hubbard, 2012).

Fuller (2013) classified post-release women into three groups regarding time management: most scheduled, semi scheduled, and least scheduled. Within the study, it

was found that the capacity to reorganize schedules to accommodate work was most apparent in the semi scheduled and least scheduled groups (Fuller, 2013). For the most scheduled groups, participants were programmed similarly to the way they were when they were incarcerated to the extent that they had free time for employment.

Interestingly, the women in these programmed groups had been home for a longer duration of time; hence, these women could be served through investigating programs that allow more time for job exploration and opportunities (Fuller, 2013).

Bellair and Kowalski (2011) compared the routine schedules of respondents to their stated aims of getting a job and found that the participants showed little to no effort towards that task. The participants believed that employment was essential, but were practical and mindful of the realities associated with their abilities to secure employment (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011). The group understood the complexities involved in gaining employment, the lesser likelihood they faced of securing employment with a living salary, and the advantage of career progression (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011). For those whose goals and objectives include securing employment that transcends paycheck earnings, the realities are viewed as impediments to achieving this goal. This population is without hope and experiences frustration to the extent where they cease job-hunting altogether.

Bellair and Kowalski (2011) noted that in addition to employment challenges, enhancing time management and problem-solving skills could boost self-efficacy and self-esteem of women, resulting in better consequences; low self-esteem was recognized as the most complex challenge regarding reintegration after release from prison. In the

absence of intervention, senses of helplessness and worthlessness may erode and individual's confidence and eventually weaken efforts to prevail over complex situations, thereby rendering effective reintegration more complicated (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011).

### **Housing Challenges**

Regardless of the widespread belief, homelessness is not solely an urban phenomenon (Gordon et al., 2013). The majority of literature focusing on female African American ex-convicts cited homelessness as the most common post-release experience (Gordon et al., 2013). There are large estimates nationwide pertaining to homelessness in the United States, with most of the research focused on urban settings. For instance, the Annual Homeless Assessment Report generated from a 2013 study approximated that 13% of the homeless population in the state of New York reside in New York City, translating to about 64,000 people (as cited by Gordon et al., 2013). However, estimates of urban homelessness are consistently higher when compared to the rural locales that homelessness in metropolitan cities is disproportionately overcounted.

The large urban homeless population tends to be more noticeable and not as widely dispersed as compared to the homeless population in rural areas (Gordon et al., 2013). Gordon et al. (2013) further found that homelessness in urban settings is often manifested in a different manner than in rural areas. The urban homeless population is less likely to dwell in abandoned structures where there is a dearth of necessities like electricity or running water; rather, the population is more likely to congregate in the street or living shelters.

Despite several options and programs available for many urban ex-prisoners, such as affordable housing, accommodation stocks in urban settings are not owner occupied. According to Staton-Tindall et al. (2011), 76% of urban ex-prisoners do not own their dwellings, which is a number that is significantly greater than the national average of 68%. For many urban ex-prisoners, home ownership is not an option especially because they are left to struggle for restricted rental properties. The unavailability of quality affordable rental properties turned out to be a key contributor to homelessness in several urban setting cases. Staton-Tindall et al. confirmed that a considerable number of women ex-prisoners encounter homelessness and reported a greater occurrence of individuals without established homes among the population that have custodial and non-custodial orders. Additionally, the researchers found evidence from boarding houses demonstrating considerable percentages of ex-prisoners among residents and applicants (Staton-Tindall et al., 2011).

African American women who serve prison time often lose their homes as they are no longer able to pay rent during incarceration (Lynch et al., 2012). Loss of a home usually leads to the fragmentation of the family and to other significant problems (Ahmed, Angel, Martell, Pyne, & Keenan, 2016). Most ex-prisoners have nowhere to return once released from prison and their need for support and employment, coupled with several other issues, may pose impediments to securing and maintaining affordable housing (Gordon et al., 2013). A permanent home is often a critical factor in avoiding recidivism or returning to offense. The Homelessness Act (2002) recognizes that inmates



are vulnerable to becoming homeless and encourages local authorities to include ex-inmates' issues as priority and preference class.

Studies have confirmed that the lack of affordable housing options and economic conditions are strong reasons that further intensify accommodation issues for urban ex-prisoners during post prison release (Gordon et al., 2013; Lynch, DeHart, Belknap, & Green, 2012). According to research conducted on homeless populations, researchers found that urban homeless populations were more likely than the suburban population to have been imprisoned. Sixty-four percent of urban homeless population had completed prison time compared to 44% of suburban ex-prisoners and 55% of ex-prisoners in metro cities (Gordon et al., 2013; Lynch et al., 2012). There is significant amount of evidence that highlights the challenges faced by African American women ex-prisoners in securing accommodation after their release from prison. Previous studies set out several attitudinal, financial, procedural, and structural hurdles to meeting the housing needs of ex-prisoners (Gordon et al., 2013; Lynch et al., 2012). The problem is further compounded due to the scarcity of accommodations (Lynch et al., 2012).

Furthermore, other problems like grant inadequacy and discharge add to setbacks in the preferential treatment previously enjoyed by the female ex-convicts upon post-release (Richards et al., 2012). Similarly, requirements for rent deposit and rent advancement worsen this population's opportunity to affordable and sustainable accommodation (Gordon et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that owners of private and social properties view ex-convicts as undesirable and high-risk occupants (Richards et al., 2012). To overcome these obstacles, there is a need to create a link between the criminal

justice system's agencies and other organizations to assist ex-prisoners in finding adequate and affordable accommodations from private, voluntary, and social sectors.

Hubbard (2012) argued that working partnerships are facilitated by challenge recognition encountered by all stakeholders in fulfilling the accommodation needs of ex-prisoners and the strategies developed to assist in ameliorating such issues. For instance, Fiedler and Mann (2012) proposed that housing providers are eager to recognize and accept referrals in a timely manner, as well as accommodate ex-prisoners if pertinent risk evaluations have been made. This is especially true if appropriate funding is available and accessible to ensure ample supervision and support. Openness and transparency around data sharing and risk evaluation to ascertain and ensure sufficient support solidifies the trust relationship between housing providers and the criminal justice system agencies. On this level, housing accessibility for women ex-prisoners, whether in private or social sectors, is facilitated by accurate risk evaluations through the appropriate agency, robust arrangements of supervision, and/or support, including data/record sharing between property owners and criminal justice system agencies (Fiedler & Mann, 2012; Hubbard, 2012).

Organizations that work with ex-prisoners are highly essential to the development of effective channels of communication with accommodation providers to ensure continued support and commitment when ex-prisoners enter the shelter (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Moreover, strategies are needed to support excellent quality engagement of private rental sector. For instance, Fiedler and Mann (2012) proposed connecting incentives for property-owners to fulfill distinct accommodation standards, property

management practices, and tenure security. Promised leasing, such as tenancy arrangement, offers support systems for property owners should issues arise and rent schemes guarantee deposits (Fiedler & Mann, 2012).

Boosting diversity is significant during the transition stage of short-term to long-term housing to make sure that the obstruction to creating new short-term housing is reduced. For examples, tenancy support workers may form associations with local housing providers and assist in negotiating accessibility to independently established accommodations. As soon as clients are resettled, housing providers could cooperate with tenants to uphold the tenancy agreement between clients, housing providers, and ex-convicts (tenants) who are still under statutory supervision or on probation. Several studies support the significance of relocation support for female African American ex-convicts who intend to reenter the community (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Fasula et al., 2013). Resettlement support facilitates susceptible individuals to sustain occupancies, to reenter the community, and to avoid repeated episodes vagrancy (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Fasula et al., 2013).

Even though not all ex-prisoners need support, some endure social exclusion frequently (Campbell, 2011). This exclusion is related to negative perceptions held by society, a lack of essential skills, and associated high levels of need (i.e., needing help with psychological health issues or substance abuse; Campbell, 2011). According to Campbell (2011), family, addiction, employment, and financial problems may all impact accommodation and vice versa. Incarcerated African American females often encounter housing problems, including abandoned tenancies and former expulsions or exemptions

from housing options. These problems are elevated by the complexities of accessing advantages and employment services (Campbell, 2011).

Female ex-convicts may lack social and familial support because they may have disruptive family backgrounds or may be in need of care, and the possibilities of continuing their livelihoods may now depend on charitable organizations that assist them in securing and maintaining housing (Campbell, 2011). These women who may never have lived alone may face more challenges and may require additional emotional support, thereby requiring extra aid in developing independent living skills. Training and education is the key support area for these women, particularly African American women (Campbell, 2011). Campbell (2011) proposed that there is a need for effective for ex-prisoner support, including counseling organizations to ensure sustenance of tenancy and holistic assessment that determines the complete range of ex-prisoners' accommodations.

There seems to be an escalation in recognizing the important role that connect and tie schemes may play in ensuring ongoing and comprehensive support. Allspach (2010) ensured that these schemes may also have a significant advocacy role for ex-prisoners. These schemes can drastically enhance the ability of ex-prisoners to sustain and access accommodation; supporters may be members of charitable organizations, probation practitioners, or offenders who are helping in the resettlement (Allspach, 2010).

In Bedfordshire, researchers observed ex-prisoners' accommodation and support requirement reports that offer the connection to other services that can correlate accommodation accessibility (Allspach, 2010). Allspach (2010) found that encouraging a housing provider to consider accommodating ex-prisoners, particularly women ex-

prisoners, may strengthen and built an affinity with local providers through community-based connections. Allspach further signified that supporters may be beneficial in challenging ineffective accommodation decisions and offering support petitions against them. Moreover, these schemes' roles highlight the significance of ex-prisoners' reviews and personal accountability of their current and past activities as occupiers towards becoming sustaining renters.

### **Health Problems in Post-release**

Over the years, various studies have provided evidence that female African American ex-convicts face psychiatric disabilities, which was an issue that remained a matter of concern for both the criminal justice and mental health systems (Hubbard, 2012). Although all ex-prisoners can obtain employment and housing, individuals with psychological problems require referrals and access to outpatient and mental health services as well as the establishment of health insurance for the settlement and payment of medication and treatment. These referrals are essential, but it is unknown whether these services are sufficient during discharge planning and change of programs. Bellair and Kowalski (2011) stated that as many as half of women ex-prisoners suffered from some form of psychological disability. Approximately 24% of women ex-prisoners with a diagnosed psychiatric disability are associated with drug-related offenses or crimes like drug offending, and 18% of women ex-prisoners undergo severe psychological disorder of mood or thoughts (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011).

After being released from jail, African American women had no form of health insurance or medical coverage and only 10% had access to any health maintenance

organization or any other private health insurance program (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011). Only 5% of African American women who were formerly incarcerated benefit from Medicare, Medicaid, disability, or health insurance from the Veterans Affairs Administration, while 58% of the study participants had routinely visited their physicians for medical evaluations after completing their incarceration, and only 19% had received services through the emergency room for health-related issues (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011).

For African American women, the experience of grief appears to obscure the adverse psychological health effects of incarceration as such (Hubbard, 2012). Hubbard (2012) piloted a program to create awareness regarding bereavement as a means of health promotion for African American women ex-prisoners. Focusing on 17 African American women ex-convicts released from metropolitan correctional facilities, Hubbard (2012) interviewed the women regarding the grief experienced and provided entry to the program. The women recounted coping poorly with grief and expressed a higher likelihood of consuming drugs due to their involvement with illicit drugs; this led to anxiety, depression, and the intensification of suicidal ideation (Hubbard, 2012).

Hubbard's (2012) results demonstrated the need to address behavioral etiologies together with conditions of incarceration on African American women. Such interventions could be successful in the post-release period, but seem to remain unexplored. The impact of a primary approach of mental health care for ex-prisoners seems beneficial for decreasing referrals to secondary care mental health at a significant rate of about 50% (Hubbard, 2012). The major problem ascribed to post-release

experiences faced by African American women is the probability of death associated with drug offending. Research shows that the theoretical incurable risk of addiction in women offenders, released from metropolitan prisons, decreased tolerance levels, and a celebratory fix, such as drug consumption associated with certain milestones, created a lethal combination of factors (Hunter and Greer (2011)).

Hunter and Greer's study (2011) approximated that in each year 160 ex-convicts who had served time for drug offending died intentionally or accidentally during their first week post-release. Consequently, Hunter and Greer reported that during the period between 1996 and 1999 the ex-convict mortality rate was 7 times higher in 2 weeks after release when compared to the period prior to incarceration. These statistics were 2.8 times greater than the rate of suicide in the incarcerated male population between the ages of 15 and 35 who experienced imprisonment for over 14 days (Hunter & Greer, 2011).

Hunter and Greer's (2011) findings show that evaluation of and investment in prison-based interventions is required to decrease mortality rates, especially in the case of drug offenders. The results showed that mortality is the common experience after serving prison time, especially among African American women in comparison to the general population, with risk factors that includes tolerance loss to opiates as post-release experience and social and mental stress (Hunter & Greer, 2011).

### **Recidivism**

Most studies on women ex-prisoners explore the likelihood of continued engagement in criminal offenses, also known as *recidivism* (Woodall et al., 2013). This term is generally determined by rearrest, reconviction, and reincarceration. Researchers

who studied recidivism emphasized determining the causes and rationale for recidivism (Lynch et al., 2012; Woodall et al., 2013). The studies usually did not explore the process through which a person chooses to recommit a crime or chooses to stop offending, nor did they emphasize ex-prisoners' reintegration; instead, they focused on a single consequence, such as whether the ex-prisoner was taken into custody or not (Woodall et al., 2013). Woodall et al. (2013) reported that approximately 20% of the sample returning home committed at least one new crime within the 6 months following release and 15% accounted being imprisoned for a post-release crime.

Most of the new crimes were drug offending, distribution, and possession (Woodall et al., 2013). Overall, 13% of the participants were rearrested for drug possession; 9% for drug offending; 5% for violent offenses such as homicide, assault, robbery, and so forth; and 2% for other types of offenses (Woodall et al., 2013). Less than 1% of the study participants were rearrested for crimes like forgery, fraud, grand theft auto, and burglary (Woodall et al., 2013). Recidivism was reported for both women and men; statistically, there were no significant differences in recidivism rates between the sexes (Woodall et al., 2013). Both women and men were similarly likely to report a new offense after release from prison, as well as self-report a rearrest after serving prison time (Woodall et al., 2013).

The official data on imprisonment explains the extent of post-release offending activities as compared to participant self-reports. Based on the research of Lynch et al. (2012), 32% of post-release respondents were reincarcerated for crimes committed at least once within 6 months of their release from jail. This fraction is 7 times greater



when compared to the self-reported rate of recommitting a crime presented in both official data and self-report statistics (Lynch et al., 2012). The difference may be due to a shorter accounting period for self-reported crimes versus the period of 6 months that was outlined in official datasets (Lynch et al., 2012).

Gordon et al. (2013) found that drug offending and possession are the most common crimes perpetrated after release from prison. The findings showed that 7% of offenders are incarcerated for dealing drugs and 13% for drug possession (Gordon et al., 2013). Furthermore, 9% of the participants were again incarcerated for violent offenses; there were insignificant differences of gender in relation to these offenses of about 10% men ex-prisoners and 5% women ex-prisoners (Gordon et al., 2013). Four percent of the study participants were rearrested for other offenses like nonviolent sex crimes, traffic breaches, and weapon charges (Gordon et al., 2013).

Enos (2012) found certain characteristics, such as employment and education, to be associated with African American women ex-prisoners' recidivism rates within the literature. Out of these factors, education varied in a significant manner between non-recidivists and recidivists in the sample (Enos, 2012). Re-arrested participants were significantly less likely to have obtained a GED or high school diploma when compared to participants with no experience of re-arrest following their release from prison (Enos, 2012).

Meanwhile, Farkas (2011) asserted that financial obligations have a vital role in recidivism among African American women. Under a rational choice view, 183 study participants with poor ability to handle financial obligations were found to be more likely

to commit an economically motivated offense (Farkas, 2011). Even though a higher percentage of reconvicted and rearrested participants had liabilities after imprisonment, when compared to non-recidivists the dissimilarity was insignificant in a statistical manner. To a certain extent, most of all participants had debts after incarceration (Farkas, 2011).

Muñoz-Laboy et al. (2012) reported substance use as post-release experience among African American women after completing prison time. Given the high number of post- and pre-release drug offenders in the sample participants returning home, the key intermediary consequences that influenced post-release recidivism was participants' substance use (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2012). In the research sample, as a measure of recidivism, most of the respondents convicted for drug offending had a higher likelihood of involving themselves in the illegal drug trade after release from prison. Participants who were reconvicted and rearrested within 6 months subsequent to their imprisonment had a higher probability to have used or illegally distributed drugs before incarceration and were more likely get involved in the drug trade after incarceration when compared to non-recidivists (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2012).

Other studies asserted that the lack of preparation regarding reintegration also increased the likelihood of recidivism among women ex-prisoners (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). To evaluate the effectiveness of participants' contributions in prison-based reintegration programs, Fiedler and Mann (2012) assessed variations between recidivists and non-recidivists using four measures of reintegration preparation. Such measures signified whether participants had taken part in any of the following activities: work-

release employment opportunities, substance abuse treatment programs, job training or education programs, and prerelease programs (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Throughout the four measures, Fiedler and Mann found no noteworthy differences in the nonrecidivist and recidivists' percentages of recidivism. Participants who participated in reintegration programs or held work-release employment were equally likely to have been reincarcerated and reconvicted after release from prison as recidivists (Fiedler & Mann, 2012). It was found, however, that substance abuse treatment decreased the probability of post-release experience of drug use among women ex-prisoners (Fiedler & Mann, 2012).

According to Fiedler and Mann (2012) another common reason that women ex-prisoners reported recidivism is due to the lack of family support during the post-release period. Participants with strong familial support and bonds are less likely to engage in recidivism when compared to participants who significantly lacked protective measures. Furthermore, participants with family members who engage in criminal behavior are more likely to return to the criminal lifestyle. Despite this information, a study evaluated the differences between post-release and pre-prison determinants of close relations attachment, criminality, and presence, and found almost no significant variation between non-recidivists and recidivists (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2012).

Both non-recidivist and recidivist women had an equal probability of coming from supportive and close families and having optimistic support of partners. The one major difference was that rearrested women with spouses had higher degrees of little to no support from said spouses (Muñoz-Laboy et al., 2012). Most criminology studies that

observe the post-release experiences of women found that peers who engage in criminal behavior have a strong effect on the recently released individuals, often exacerbating their chances of avoiding recidivism (Staton-Tindall et al., 2011). The accurate natures of these relationships are still unclear; nevertheless, the existence of a considerable association is undisputed.

The analysis of previous studies differs significantly from other literature regarding the topic. Staton-Tindall et al. (2011) examined the degree to which peers impact the chances of women's re-arrest, showing that there were no significant disparities between recidivists and non-recidivists in terms of having close friends while serving prison time or after release from the prison. Criminology studies increasingly turn to neighborhood-level descriptions of criminal recidivism (Campbell, 2011). Societies typified by greater levels of economic and social disadvantages with high crime rates have confirmed this relation to the increasing rates of ex-prisoner recidivism.

In the evaluation of disparities across three determinants of neighborhood distinction, Campbell (2011) recognized that women who were rearrested for drug offenses accounted for having notably fewer numbers of employment opportunities in the post-release localities when compared to non-recidivists. On the other hand, the study determined that there were no significant differences in the occurrence of drug offending within post-release neighborhood respondents (Campbell, 2011). Within the study sample, the neighborhood preferences of post-release individuals are the geographical locations available for their residency. Almost half of women ex-prisoners reintegrated within a neighborhood different from the one in which they resided prior to

imprisonment, signifying that they did so to avoid problems or troubles (Campbell, 2011). In addition, the research determined no significant difference in the likelihood that women who engaged in recidivism lived in different homes than they were in prior to incarceration (Campbell, 2011). Even though there were greater percentages of reconvicted and rearrested women participants who went back to a similar place, in comparison to non-convicted and re-arrested participants, such variations were not statistically significant (Campbell, 2011).

Gordon et al. (2013) asserted that women who had been previously incarcerated have a greater likelihood of committing a crime again. Moreover, their attitudes toward criminal behavior, the legal system, and the police were noticeable unchanged after imprisonment. Even though study participants who engaged in recidivism accounted for a higher possibility of getting involved in drug offenses after their release from prison, and to some extent fewer participants signified that they were ready to modify their lives, none of these disparities were statistically significant (Gordon et al., 2013). Furthermore, differences were unimportant in the intense dissatisfaction found among both recidivists and non-recidivists toward law enforcement officers, self-esteem, and control over life. Prior to their release from prison, potential recidivists are more likely to think that laws and regulations were made to be broken and are less likely to pursue spiritual or religious values (Gordon et al., 2013).

Several researchers found that women ex-prisoners who engaged in drug offending and returned home after serving prison time were more likely to commit another crime post-release (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Fiedler & Mann, 2012).

Participants in both Bellair and Kowalski's (2011) and Fiedler and Mann's (2012) studies had widespread criminal history within their family backgrounds or as individuals; almost two thirds of the study respondents came from families where one of the family members had prior arrest for an offense or had been involved with illegal drugs. Considering that the average age of the participants was 33, had already been convicted of crime, and had spent time in prison, these findings indicate that most of the women ex-prisoners had criminal backgrounds, which developed among them a notion that offensive behavior is normal and there is no harm in committing a crime again (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Fiedler & Mann, 2012). Thus, most of the respondents' lives revolved around the criminal justice system (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Fiedler & Mann, 2012).

Richards et al. (2012) determined that the majority of their study participants spent a comparatively short period in incarceration. Most of the women studied, about 80%, had been imprisoned for less than a year. Many of them had developed low self-esteem and had trouble integrating back into the community upon returning home, leading them to recommit another crime, which followed with them ending up back in prison (Richards et al., 2012). This finding implies that the "once a prisoner, always a prisoner" mentality is particularly present in African American women ex-convicts due to the lack of opportunity towards revamping their lives; hence, the absence of opportunity for survival. On the other hand, for ex-prisoners who were imprisoned for less than 2 years, reintegration efforts must be directed more towards preventive action (Richards et al., 2012).

Illicit drugs have a vital role in criminal engagement of respondents who have returned home. Almost half of the women in Hubbard's (2012) study returning homes were incarcerated for drug offending and almost all participants were reconvicted again for their involvement in drug crimes. Nearly 83% of the study participants accounted for illicit drug offending before incarceration, and about 62% of the respondents recommitted the same crime after release from the prison. Nevertheless, only 35% of the participants had access to leading a productive life after imprisonment; such ex-prisoners were less likely to get involved in crime again and experience recidivism as a post-release experience (Hubbard, 2012). This result suggests that there are several opportunities to lead a good life after release from prison, and this plays a significant role in revamping ex-prisoners and the reduction of recidivism (Hubbard, 2012).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In summary, the major themes in the Literature Review consisted of African American women and the criminal justice system, the challenges that they face after release from prison, barriers to employment and discrimination based on convictions, factors to demand and supply of the job market, lack of support from the community and family members, and lack of time-management skills. Other themes include housing challenges, health issues after release from prison, and, lastly, recidivism. I presented research studies summarized to include the significance of supportive relationships in the lives of African American women convicted drug offenders in decreasing the stress of reintegration. These relationships are also helpful in successful reentry to the community.

These findings also conveyed that convicted women, mainly African Americans, experienced challenges and factors that contributed to recidivism. However, the research failed to specifically explore the perspectives of African American women with convicted drug offenses, to break the chain of recidivism and help them successfully integrate back into the community. After all, associations and relationships serve as a means by which a person connects with others and works within their society. My study will seek to bridge this gap in literature by focusing on those factors that work for successful reentry and those which reduce recidivism.

Chapter 1 provided the introduction, background, problem statement, purpose, research questions, theoretical foundations, nature, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 highlighted various research conclusions about convicted drug-related offenders and African American women prisoners' reentry to the community. In addition, I identified common themes from African American perspectives for successful rehabilitated living into the community.

In Chapter 3, I will explain the research methods, design, and the rationale used for my study. I will describe my role as the sole researcher of the study, as well as the methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and the ethical procedures. I will then address in Chapter 4 the data collection stages and results of the study and, finally, in Chapter 5, I will provide the discussions, interpretations, conclusions, and the recommendations of the study.



## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of convicted African American women who have the potential for high recidivism rates, who reentered the community, to understand the challenges they faced. In addition, I examined the challenges of the post-release integration of African American women to understand the mechanisms that can be used not just by African American women after their release into society, but by all incarcerated women in similar situations. In this study, I also explored the needs of African American female prisoners as they were released into their community.

The method I employed in this study was a phenomenological, descriptive, qualitative approach. A qualitative study method was used to guide the purpose, roles, methods and design, data collection, as well as the data analysis process of the study. The participants were ex-convicted African American women between the ages of 18 to 55 years of age and living in a large mid-Atlantic city without any supervision.

In Chapter 1 of this study, I provided the background, problem statement, research questions, the framework and theoretical foundations, nature, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitation, and the significance. Chapter 2 included a detailed and extensive literature review including prominent research concepts. In Chapter 3, I will provide a full description of the research process used, such as the design and rationale of the study, the role of the researcher, the sample

participants, data collection method, data analysis, issues of trustworthiness, the ethical considerations, protection of the participants, as well as the rights of the participants.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

As introduced in Chapter 1, I chose a qualitative, phenomenological, descriptive study to address the problem statement and the purpose of the study, which was to explore and investigate the perspectives of the post-release experiences of ex-convicted African American women living in the community as well as the factors contributing to their recidivism. According to Zenobia, Yuen-ling, and Wai-tong (2013), a phenomenological design is used to gather information on the core of the study phenomena. Even though there are valid variations of a phenomenological approach, I used a descriptive phenomenological approach for this study because little is known about this area of research, and as such, this approach was deemed fitting for my study (see Zenobia et al., 2013). According to Hubbard (2012), the use for a descriptive phenomenological approach seeks to have an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences as well as how the phenomena of the study was perceived and experienced by the participants as their realities.

I conducted interviews with the participants by using in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended questioning techniques by direct phone conversations or in-person, face-to-face interviews to invoke rich responses from the participants to examine the lived experiences and perspectives of post-release African American women in a large mid-Atlantic city. It is these lived experiences as well as the women's interpretation of these experiences that shed light on the meaning of their realities and that are aligned with their

role in putting a stop to or decreasing recidivism. This adopted research design and rationale made it necessary for me to gain an in-depth understanding and exploration of the social phenomenon and thoughts of this group of African American women. In order to efficiently achieve the purpose of this study, 14 participants were randomly recruited from local community public places such as at the parking lots of community resources centers or local libraries in the city.

A small participant pool was appropriate for this study because, according to Simon and Goes (2011), a phenomenological study approach may consider a small sample size between five to 25 participants to gain an in-depth investigation and exploration of the participants' viewpoint during the data collection and analysis phases. In corroboration, Mason (2010) argued that a small sample size and saturation will allow a new researcher, such as me, to be able to handle the demands of data collection for a qualitative approach as well as not be overwhelmed by the details and demands of a very large sample.

The research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of African American women who received, or did not receive, social supports after serving time for drug-related offenses in a large mid-Atlantic city? Secondly, I wanted to address three sub-questions:

1. What social supports were received, if any, post-incarceration?
2. How did those social supports affect the reintegration into the community post-incarceration?

3. Which social support(s) did participants think affected their ability to reintegrate into the community post-incarceration?

The focus of my study was exploring the perspectives of ex-convicted African American women post-experiences in the community, including the factors contributing to recidivism and prevention of recidivism.

The central phenomena for this study included the viewpoints, observations, communications, behaviors, and perceptions of the study participants. I used Colaizzi's strategy for data analysis of the responses obtained from using open-ended interviews techniques (see Shosha, 2012). The use of open-ended interviewing techniques tradition originated from the field of philosophy, as noted by Husserl's seminal work that revealed that concept of understanding an individual's lived experiences is based on allowing emergent ideas through qualitative inquiry (Zenobia et al., 2013).

According to Simon and Goes (2011), the rationale for use of this tradition of the descriptive, phenomenological, qualitative research method supports the participants' perceptions, viewpoints, beliefs, meanings, attributes, and values, as well as symbolism, that are difficult or impossible to mathematically quantify in numbers. Simon and Goes further argued that phenomenology is a philosophy and a research method for the exploration and the understanding of the perspectives of people.

Another rationale for the use of a phenomenological style, specifically Colaizzi's strategy to analyze data collected from interviews, are the proven and successful studies where the design has been employed for studies of social and human behavior and health and health care experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Shosha, 2012). For instance, McGarry et

al. (2015) used Colaizzi's strategy and interviewed 21 parents whose children suffered from burns. In analyzing the interview responses, the findings revealed that health care professions were better equipped to optimize holistic clinical approaches and protocols within clinic settings.

According to Simon and Goes (2011), the use of the phenomenological method supports the development of rich, thick descriptions of in-depth responses; as such, I used open-ended interview questions that were purposive to obtain rich and thick qualitative in-depth perspectives based on the experiences and viewpoints from the participants for my study. Colaizzi's strategy has been used in prior phenomenological qualitative studies and has proved successful.

Based on the justifications, the descriptive, phenomenological, qualitative research tradition along with the use of Colaizzi's data analysis strategy of open-ended interview questions was the most appropriate approach for this study and aided in addressing the research questions (see Shosha, 2012).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the sole researcher for this study, my role included data collection and analysis of the 14 participants who volunteered to partake in this study. As the researcher, I used the descriptive phenomenological qualitative design to collect data from a group of participants recruited by a convenience-based sampling approach and using the interview protocol instrument tool. For data analysis and to generate themes and trends, I used Colaizzi's seven-step strategy as well as the NVivo 10 software. All data generated were stored and secured in a locked cabinet and in a password-protected computer in a home

office where it will be maintained for 7 years. After 7 years, all transcribed data will be destroyed by fire and electronic data deleted from the hard drive (see Walden University, 2014).

In qualitative studies, the role of the researcher is indelibly linked to the instrument (Patton, 2002). All the information in the study flows through the researcher and it is essential for the interviewer to be skilled at interviewing, writing field notes, and observation (Lofland & Lofland, 2006). A skilled observer should be conscious of the details of the interviews, reactions, and the surroundings; able to hear language idiosyncrasies; and be able to view things as a novice, shedding prejudgments and familiarity (Bernard, 1988). A skilled interviewer understands how to ask questions, handle silence, can be flexible and responsive to the participant, uses active listening skills, and is not flustered by interruptions or overlapping talk (Xu & Storr, 2012). Field notes should contain concrete details and observations of the participant, the reflections and thoughts of the interviewer, and practical notes about setting and surroundings (Xu & Storr, 2012).

As the sole researcher, I used active listening and observatory skills as well as took detailed notes of the responses from the participants. I made sure that there were no personal or professional relationships or bonds between the participants and me. I had no supervisory, employer, instructor, or client relationships with any of the participants that could have imposed an edge or power over the participants. The interviews with the 14 volunteer participants were conducted face-to-face, by telephone, or by Skype interviews

at times and locations that were mutually selected and agreed upon by the participant and me.

I conducted interviews of the participants in a comfortable and unhostile environment, such as a private room at a local library, or, if on telephone or Skype, in the private room of the participant. No interview was conducted at a workplace or at a place open to the hearing of others for the benefit of participant confidentiality. I made a digital recording as well as took detailed notes and journal entries during the interviewing and data collection process because the role of the researcher is to ensure and validate the quality and reliability of the collected data (see Levy & Ellis, 2011). I informed all participants of the information concerning the study and the inclusion criteria, and I obtained their informed consent before beginning the interview.

As the researcher, I was aware of my researcher biases, and I managed these in several ways. In qualitative research, it is essential for the researcher to be systematic and organized to collect, analyze, construe, and explicate data (Moustakas, 1994). In order to ensure that I gathered data unencumbered by personal thoughts, ideas, or biases, I bracketed any of these preconceived notions (see Moustakas, 1994). I identified and set aside these ideas to hear and note what the participants shared with me. This was done so that I was not judgmental and my personal experiences, values, and ideas did not interfere with the themes identified but allowed the true lived experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives shared with me by the participants to emerge in the data collection process (see Zenobia et al., 2013).

Binswanger et al. (2011) argued that respondents with hardships or negative experiences, like ex-prisoners, often show a great deal of nervousness and apprehension when facing questions about their personal stories and lives by investigators. To consider this aspect of discomfort that could have occurred during the interviews, I sought to lessen these feelings by making sure that each participant was comfortable in the interview environment with privacy assured.

Another of my roles as a researcher was to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data. I used triangulation of the data collected to assure the trustworthiness of the descriptive phenomenological qualitative data. I also compared and verified my field notes and the audio recordings captured during the interviews to the coded data using the NVivo 10 software to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research data. In addition, I verified my notes with the digital recordings of the interview by using the NVivo 10 software as well as the data coded for cross-referencing.

Another role of the researcher is to increase the reliability and the accuracy of the qualitative data collected (Simon & Goes, 2011). Simon and Goes (2011) argued that to achieve this important task for a research study, an accurate transcription of the data must be verified, and it can be obtained by comparing the audiotaped interview responses against the notes taken by the researcher during the interview, and with the coded data collected. In my study, data were triangulated by member checking, and by comparing the data to transcribed notes and the current literature available on the research topic.

As the researcher, a careful and thorough effort was made to create a welcoming environment to build rapport and encourage trust. The setting for the interviews was



casual and informal. I introduced myself by my first name. I ensured that my attire and manner were casual and approachable. I kept my tone conversational, courteous, and friendly, and checked in with the participants frequently to judge their level of comfort with the process.

To ensure credibility and validity I used member checking with participants if the interview data proved to be questionable and I required further clarification. This process helped to validate my research approach as well as substantiate that my interview questions had face validity. More specifically, these results confirmed that my questions addressed the research questions and achieved what they purported to do (see Simon & Goes, 2011). I ensured that the request for follow up was included in the informed consent process. Simon and Goes (2011) stated that an interview protocol tool should include an introduction, a heading, the interviewer's instructions, informed consents, the research questions, probing, open-ended questions, and that the interviewer will listen and pause to record or take note of the participants' responses. Researchers must also be mindful and sensitive to bias, limiting judgments, views, opinions, and values (Simon & Goes, 2011).

Ethical issues, such as recruiting personal family members or friends for the study were strictly avoided. This was to eliminate any issues of conflict of interest. If a relative or friend had been mistakenly recruited for the study, the participant would be immediately excused from participation in the study and all data collected from that individual were destroyed. Another participant would be contacted and recruited to replace the individual who was excused from the study to meet the targeted number of

participants. However, none of the recruited participants required exclusion for this reason. No interview was conducted in the work place, and no extravagant gifts or money were given or promised to any participants. Per Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the ethical rules and standards of Walden IRB policy, a token gift can be provided to the participants as a “thank you” appreciation for participating in a research study. Therefore, a \$5 gift card from Dunkin’ Donuts was awarded each participant and the participant was not be required to return the gift card if she withdrew from or did not complete participation in the study (see Walden University, 2012). I thanked the participants using the statement detailed in the interview protocol and provided the \$5 gift card to every participant and reminded them that they did not have to return the card even if they did not complete the study. In doing so I left room for future clarification of answers, issues, or concerns if needed.

To ensure the protection of human subjects, I took the NIH’s human research subject training. I did not anticipate that my research would bring about any ethical dilemmas specific to my interview questions. Because the interview questions are not intrusive in nature, I did not anticipate that the questions would generate an emotional response from participants. However, in the event any participant experienced emotional issues from the interviews, a social reference and counseling list was provided as a source for free counseling by phone, Internet, or in person.

All data collected will be maintained in good condition and be free of any type of damage, including but not limited to: environmental, fire, water, or time passage. The data will be stored in an external storage device for backup in case of unforeseen

circumstances or events that might breach the data. External storage backup will also be password protected and accessible only by me, the researcher.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

For this study, I used a qualitative phenomenological in-depth open-ended interview protocol to interview the participants for the study. The open-ended type of questioning provided me with the ability to capture the richness of the lived experiences of my research participants and combine them to develop a collective sense of meaning of the issues that I set out to explore. Qualitative analyses added flexibility to my research effort, as it afforded me the opportunity to read through the interview transcripts, and thus identify patterns/trends and themes from the data (Farndon & Borthwick, 2007). This research study involved face-to-face interviews of 14 African American women who had been convicted for drug related offenses and had been incarcerated but are now in the community without any form of supervision or parole conditions in the city. Although Elford, Bolding, Davis, Sheer, and Hart (2004), identified that face-to-face data produce more data than online or telephone interviews, other options such as Skype or the telephone were used to provide participants with choices. Advantages of face-to-face interviews are that several, nonverbal reinforcements, such as eye contact and voice inflection for emphasis, are reinforced.

The criteria for selection included age, gender, and length of time spent in prison before this release. Participants were between 18 and 55 years of age. Gender had to be female, ethnicity of African American descent with prior drug conviction offenses, and

had been released from a prison between the last 6 months but not more than the last five years. The participants must have resided in this large mid-Atlantic city without any form of supervision.

My study excluded juveniles because they have access to different programs of post-release in comparison to women aged over 18 years. This study also excluded currently incarcerated inmates in any local, state, federal institution, or halfway houses. The exclusion criteria also included anyone on probation, parole, supervised released monitoring, or minors.

A convenience-based sampling strategy was used, with justification that the location for the data collection area was feasible and affordable. According to Mason (2010), convenience-based sampling is conducive to achieving a study's goals, as well as cost effectiveness; but, Mason further argued that a possible demerit for a convenience-based sampling data collection method is a misrepresentation of the viewpoint of the entire participant pool. However, phenomenological research studies are specific to individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon of a research investigation. Therefore, staying alert to the possibility of misrepresentation, making sure that each participant's viewpoint was accurately represented, and checking and crosschecking responses for accuracies was imperative by using cross-referencing of my notes to audio and digital as well as member checking.

The convicted African American women population chosen for the study was also significant and justified for the exploration of the missing gap in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 of this study that dealt with the perceptions, viewpoints, and lived

experiences of their post-release into the community that play a role in recidivism. The data collection approach, criteria, and sampling strategy used for this study through the interview questions targeted the sample of 14 African American women aged 18 to 55 years old from the large mid-Atlantic city in the United States who had been convicted of drug-related offenses and then released from prison. The rationale for the small sampling was that in-depth analysis, knowledge, and understanding of the viewpoints of study participants could be effectively analyzed and managed by the researcher (Simon & Goes, 2011).

The participants were asked for their age to fit the criteria, had to be able to speak fluent English, and gave verbal and signed informed consent. Participants were randomly recruited from local public settings such as local food banks parking lots and outside social and behavioral resource centers in the community, including local African American places of worship. The semi-structured open-ended interview questions were used. Participation for this study was voluntary.

I used snowball, or chain referral, sampling. This is a method that has been widely used in qualitative sociological research. The method yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest. Bulletin fliers were provided to the individuals as well, who may have known other persons who met the criteria for the proposed study to recruit participants. Participants were asked to complete and sign the informed consent. An interview protocol was utilized for the study and my NIH card was also made available for participants' viewing. The sample size of the targeted population

was an appropriate size to reach saturation as recommended by Francis et al. (2010). The size of the sample was determined by the optimum number necessary to enable valid inferences to be made about the population. The larger the sample size, the smaller the chance of a random sampling error, but since the sampling error is inversely proportional to the square root of the sample size, there is usually little to be gained from studying very large samples (Baker & Edwards, 2012). The optimum sample size depends upon the parameters of the phenomenon under study, for example the rarity of the event or the expected size of differences in outcome between the intervention and control groups. Therefore, according to Mason (2010), the study was within the scope and standard to assure saturation was reached from the random participant pool of 30 participants.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

As the researcher of this study, I was the primary instrument for data collection (see Tracy, 2013). The secondary instrument was the semi-structured interview guide. I collected the data for this study using an in-depth, semi-structured interview with post-release African American women inmates who were convicted of drug-related offenses, regarding their perspectives and experiences reintegrating into society. The interview questions were designed to elicit as much information as possible from the interviewees.

Participants were recruited in two ways. First, flyers were posted at places of worship bulletin boards where the worshippers are predominantly African Americans, many of whom have had drug related problems before turning to religion. I also distributed the fliers to people at parking lots of major shopping complexes around the same neighborhood of African American people, while also encouraging them to give to

others who may fit the criteria. Potential participants were encouraged to contact me through my contact information on the flyers. When potential participants numbered fewer than 30, I continued to solicit and give flyers within the African American community in in the city, until I reached my target number. I followed up contacts and conducted interview sessions in person, one-on-one, so that I could gather as much data as possible on tone, body language, hesitations, and observe their behavior and personal presentations. For comfort, ability, and accessibility, the participants selected the interview mode.

My interview area focused on the following:

1. Details regarding adjustment to the communities where the participants were released in the city.
2. Drug involvement and probability of recidivism
3. Present life situations
  - a. Accommodation
  - b. Employment
  - c. Health issues
  - d. Spending
  - e. Income

The interview questions were based upon the research questions. According to Tracy (2013), an important consideration when creating interview questions are that, it is important not to use jargon, and it is important to ensure the questions are not leading and

the questions are clear and easy to understand. These considerations were applicable to the semi-structured interview questions I used for this study.

The participants were required to provide informed consent. The interviews were audio recorded so that I could collect rich and detailed data using a systematic process to capture all information that the participant wished to provide. As a backup, I used field notes and employed strategies during the interview process to serve as a contingency, should the recorder or other associated technology fail. The interview had multiple parts to ensure that I established rapport with participants. This was important so that I had the best chance of eliciting the participants' full disclosure of their experiences.

I transcribed these interviews and placed them in NVivo qualitative data analysis software for review and data management. Finally, I fashioned thematic data into a report for the participant to review to confirm the accuracy of information provided by the participants (a process also known as member checking). In addition to the list of open-ended interview questions that were based on models of other successful phenomenological studies, the face-to-face semi-structured interview format enabled the respondents to articulate their experiences and ideas (see McGarry et al., 2015).

Duration of the interviewing process was 45 to 60 minutes, which was at the convenience of the participant, and was the best method for data collection for the study. One interview session was conducted and in the event a clarification of an answer was needed, I contacted the participant for a 10 to 15minute follow-up interview for correct representation of the data I collected. Participants could withdraw at will or not proceed with the study and they did not have to return the \$5 gift card either. If that occurred, I



proceeded with solicitation replacement for participants to meet my targeted number of 10 to 15 participants for my study. The research is based on the post-release views, experiences, and perceptions of African American women, previously convicted of drug-related offenses, aged 18 to 55 who currently reside in the community of this large mid-Atlantic city without any form of supervision. I established rapport with participants by using multiple parts of the interview guide to obtain in-depth and full disclosure of the participant's lived experiences.

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

Interviews were the primary source of information used for data collection in this research study and I was the primary instrument for gathering information in this research study. I gathered the data, analyzed the information, and reported the findings (see Barrett, 2007). Skills required to do this successfully included active listening, observation, and recording detail (Barrett, 2007). Using these tools, I collected data using the semi-structured open-ended interview guide by using probes such as, "Can you tell me more about that?" and, "How did that make you feel?" to elicit additional information. I kept detailed field notes to record information, observations, and personal thoughts and ideas (see Groenwald, 2004).

Recruitment was through solicitation from flyers that I placed at the local public community center bulletin boards, as well as in African American places of worship bulletin boards. I sought the permission of the superintendent of the place of worship before pasting my flyer on their bulletin board. Information on my flyer showed how the interested participants will contact me. I also directly approached the public housing

facilities in the city that are populated predominantly by African Americans in low-income neighborhoods. I collected data from African American women who had been convicted of drug-related charges and served prison time but were currently living in this city, after I received approval from the Walden University IRB to conduct this research. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before any interview was conducted. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone or Skype, and were audio recorded with permission from each participant. All requirements and the informed consent form were explained, and a meeting time and place was arranged, such as at a private room in a local library for a face-to-face interview or at the participants' private room if via telephone or Skype.

No personal information of the participants was recorded. As such, the participants' answers or responses were not linked to any identifying characteristics that could associate their responses to them (see Walden University, 2014). Therefore, a pseudonym was used and all participants' identifiable information were masked and protected by numerical digits such as 001, 002, and so forth. All data will be stored in a locked cabinet in my private home office and on a password-protected personal computer. All participants' telephone numbers and addresses will be kept confidential. After 7 years, all data will be shredded and destroyed.

When meeting for the interview, the informed consent was explained again and signed by each participant. Participants were informed again of their right to withdraw at any time. Information found in the informed consent form also included the information that the interview would be recorded and that the interview was private and would occur

on a one-on-one basis. The recordings were transcribed into a report for the participant to review and confirm accuracy of information collected, otherwise known as member checking.

All participants had the opportunity to answer questions and talk about their day-to-day concerns and experiences. They were encouraged to share their feelings, thoughts, and musings (see Christensen, 2011). The interview sessions lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes; a follow up of 10 to 15 minutes was sometimes necessary for clarification of responses or if further information was required. Upon conclusion of the research, I provided a one- to two-page' brief summary of the results to each participant either by telephone, e-mail, or regular mail of participants' choice, and informed participants that they were welcome to view the full study upon publication.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

In this study, the primary data source was interview transcripts obtained from semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed for analysis and the data analysis plan used for this study replicated Colaizzi's seven-step strategy as follows: (a) transcribe and review each participants' interview transcript thoroughly to obtain content; (b) extract significant statements from the participants' pertinent to research questions, such as descriptions of how a participant feels about their post experiences; (c) interpret and formulate meanings from direct quotes of the participants for accurate data reflection; (d) categorize the meanings of responses from the participants through data analysis of themes and clusters; (e) narrate the results into a comprehensive report; (f) conceptualize the fundamental findings of each response; and lastly, (g) validate the interpretation with

the participants (Shosha, 2012). I transcribed these interviews using NVivo qualitative data analysis software for review and data management.

In Table 1, I have listed how Colaizzi's seven-step strategy was used for data analysis for this study.

Table 1

*Purpose of Colaizzi's Strategy to the Data Analysis*

Step	Action	Data Analysis Process
1	Transcribe	Transcribe participants interviews dialog into detailed report loaded in NVivo qualitative data analysis software
2	Extract	Extract significant statements from participants' transcripts and analyze within reports
3	Interpret	Interpret meanings of participants' responses from the extracted significant statements
4	Categorize	Categorize and sort participants' interpretations into clusters and themes
5	Narrate	Narrate participants' perceptions within exhausted report with descriptions
6	Conceptualize	Conceptualize the fundamental findings of each participants' response
7	Validate	Validate the interpretation with the participants

In addition, NVivo 10 software was used for data analysis that enabled the organization of interview data collected into themes and trends for synthesis and the understanding of the primary phenomena and core essence of the participants' lived experiences. According to Hycner (1999), these steps are required to analyze data: bracketing and phenomenological reduction, delineating meaning units, using the data to form themes, summarizing the interviews to their essence, and extracting themes in order to illustrate the data and how the themes and subthemes intertwine and form meaning. Hand coding established triangulation of the interview data collected in cases of

discrepancy. Therefore, if any discrepant case had occurred during my research, I would have contacted the Walden University IRB and the health expert who validated the participants' interview questions to request approval and validation for revision of participants' interview questions and protocol.

The participants were required to speak and understand the English language to reduce or eliminate confusion; and to promote an understanding of what the expected questions and responses were from the interview. Participants who did not provide informed consent were not included in this study. Most importantly, friends and family members were excluded from participating as respondents, in order to eliminate bias.

Thomas and Magilvy (2011) argued that the qualitative research methods and strategies used for the study are often based on views, intent, depth, comprehension, experiences, and beliefs of the researcher, therefore the study can be tainted or biased by the researcher's views and opinions. Miles et al. (2014) argued that even though a study may be contaminated by the researcher's influence on this type of research, the researcher must exercise careful consideration as to the methods and ways that data are being collected, so as not to create bias or taint the data. Recommendations are that researchers should utilize some strategic awareness of bias in their research study and to make sure that bias is reduced to a minimum or eliminated (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Maxwell (2008) further recommended that the researcher must adopt ways to minimize the risk of bias, and that it is very important for a researcher to develop and maintain a bias risk assessment tool in the initial stages of a research study. The researcher should develop a research plan that focuses and foresees any type of ethical

issues or concerns that could arise in the study. Maxwell said that there are varied opinions as well as to the strategies that the researcher uses to contribute strength and quality to a qualitative research study. Finally, Penner and McClement (2008) concluded that there are several methods and strategies used in any type of research, but that the main purpose of research is to be accurate, credible, dependable, and high quality, making sure that attention is paid to issues regarding ethics.

I upheld standards for qualitative findings, mindful of the issue of bias. Bias was limited by awareness of personal views and opinions. Knowing this helped ensure that personal views and opinions did not play any role in, nor interfere with, findings in the research study or responses of the participants. Therefore, as the researcher for this study, I was not judgmental and did not impose my personal views or opinions on any participants. I did not discuss any personal questions or invite any participant out for social activities. I conducted and upheld myself in a professional manner at all times. No families, friends, or colleagues were interviewed for this study. The site and location for the interviews was calm and comfortable for the participant, and no interviews were held in a workplace.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were free to vacate the study at any time and were not obligated to finish the study. Necessity for a replacement participant would end if saturation was reached, which was when no new or relevant information relating to the study was uncovered. Finally, participants were informed of the time frame of when the study would be published and were welcomed to review the study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

For any research study to be successful there must be an establishment of trust. The researcher can attain trustworthiness by developing a sound and ethical study free from biases and threats that may jeopardize the participants, the quality, and the outcome of the study (Penner & McClement, 2008). Therefore, to ensure that my research was free from these threats, I completed trustworthiness training on human subjects and obtained my certification from the NIH Office of Extramural Research for the protection of my participants. In addition, to ensure the protection of the volunteer participants, I ensured and maintained credibility by conducting myself in a professional manner and treating each participant with dignity and respect. I maintained a 40 to 60 minutes' contact with each participant during the interviewing phase for data collection to ensure and assure rich, detailed, and thick response of their lived experiences and viewpoints (Penner & McClement, 2008).

After the interviews were completed, I provided a transcript of each participant's responses to the individual participant to verify that the information provided was correct and accurate. My limited sample size of 14 participants out of the 30 participants recruited for the study asserted saturation to the point that no new revelation occurred (Mason, 2010).

When conducting qualitative research, instead of focusing on reliability and validity, researchers focus on ensuring the data they use is trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Trustworthiness is defined as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Miles et al., 2014). Credibility can be established using member

checking, in that the participant can confirm that the results are an accurate representation of their experience (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Transferability speaks to the ability to take the information and apply it elsewhere (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). If a common theme is found in all interviews, the researcher could posit that it is a universal experience.

However, transferability is not the object of qualitative studies, rather understanding of a specific phenomenon is what is essential (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). As such, I collected data by using the open-ended interview questions to obtain in-depth perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints of the study participants (see Miles et al., 2014).

Dependability is defined as data that remain constant over time (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Methods to ensure dependability can include follow-up questions, and the interviewer self-checking as the research process continues and can be obtained through establishing data audit trails as well by the use of triangulation. I used Colaizzi's strategies and NVivo 10 software for data analysis to enable the organization of the interview responses into themes and trends for the possible synthesis and interpretation of the data collected (see Shosha, 2012).

According to Miles et al. (2014), confirmability means that if another researcher conducted the same study, they would receive similar results. They argued that some criteria of trustworthiness are credibility, dependability, and quality. I ensured and secured confirmability by checking and cross checking the data information throughout the study and verifying with each participant that their responses were correct and accurate using member checking. Therefore, in order to assure and ensure quality,



credibility, and trustworthiness, all preconceived notions, assumptions, or ideas were set aside to eliminate bias and gain the trust of participants.

The seven steps of data analysis outlined by Colaizzi's strategy (Shosha, 2012) to transcribe the data, extract information, interpret the responses, categorize into themes and trends, narrate, conceptualize, and finally validate the data, all contributed to the principles of trustworthiness for my study (see Moustakas, 1994). I provided each participant with a data identification pseudonym, such as 001, 002, 003; a brief written explanation of what the study entails; and a written documentation of informed consent. I provided a valid NIH research card for identification of certified researcher status for human participants. Finally, I informed the participants that they were not obligated to participate, or continue participating in the research, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and did not have to return the \$5 Dunkin' Donuts gift card given to each participant as a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

### **Ethical Procedures**

This study was designed based upon the procedures and codes of Walden University Ethics Committee approved and established by the university (Walden University, 2014). Given that the targeted population may have been wary of participation due to sensitivity and that they are vulnerable to exploitation, the ethical issues were of great significance. I was aware of these concerns and sensitivities, and assured that I upheld and protected all participants from unethical issues held in conducting this research study. I immediately addressed any ethical concerns if any

occurred with all honesty and respect to the participant; however, no ethical issues were foreseen for this research study.

I was cautious and careful to practice a consent process whereby study respondents, when initially approached with a request to participate in an interview, were told about their ability to leave the interview at any phase during the study. Ethical considerations are not merely a beginning phase or obstacle to opt out of during the study, the participants must be reminded that they are free to depart at any time. As the researcher, I was prepared and willing to go over the informed consent form as often as required. The participants were informed that they had the ability to end the interview during any phase and were not required to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable or required to return the \$5 gift card. Because of the participants' vulnerability, interviews with the women were conducted in private such as a private room in a local library for a face-to-face interview, or at the participants' private room for a telephone or Skype interview with one else present or in earshot. No interview was conducted in a workplace.

The reason and purpose behind the interview was clearly communicated and explained to all participants and permission was requested and obtained for informed consent and for an audio recording of the interview by endorsing the consent form, to demonstrate their willingness and desire to share their post-release experiences for the purpose of this research. I informed all participants about the benefits and risks of participating in the study, as well as their confidential rights. This study posited very minimal and negligible risk of harm to the participants; as such, I protected the identity

and confidentiality of the participants by masking all identifiable data or information such as names, telephone numbers, e-mail address, and so forth, with numbers or pseudonyms such as 001, 002, or 003. Participant's telephone numbers and e-mail addresses were confidential, used only for the need to clarify or address any issue, question, or concern pertaining to the study. Furthermore, I made sure that all participants understood that participation was voluntary and the interview may last anywhere from 45 to 60 minutes, with a follow up 10 to 15 minutes for clarification of responses if necessary at a later date later and time of their choice. After all interviews were completed, I transcribed all data into a written report for review and confirmation of accuracy of information they provided. I informed the participants that the confidentiality of the research results was assured as my sole researcher status and my committee professors who supervised me were the only people with access to the descriptive qualitative data. I provided all participants with the free resource counseling information if any participant experienced emotional issues as a result of this research. All research information and data collected will be locked and secured in a filing cabinet in my home office and password protected in my personal computer for the duration of 7 years, after which all data will be destroyed by fire, shredded, and permanently deleted off my computer (see Walden University, 2014).

I completed all necessary IRB application in accordance with the Walden University IRB guidelines, including the ethical regulations and directives of Title 45 of the Codes of Federal Regulations Part 46 Protection of Human Subjects (Title 45 CFR

Part 46). I sent out an application for approval and authorization by the board before any research or data were collected for this study.

The research was not conducted in partnership with any organization concerning participants, the provision of data, or the interviewing space used. I was not in partnership or affiliated with any organization, private, or government agencies other than Walden University where I am currently enrolled as a student to obtain my doctoral degree in Public Policy, Criminal Justice.

Participants' telephone numbers and e-mail addresses were confidential, used only for clarification or to address any issue, question, or concern pertaining to the study. Participants' contact information was maintained using a password-protected computer, and all data collected were stored in a secure manner in locked cabinet in a home office.

Giving of a gift card is not uncommon for research studies. Ethics regulations and standards of the IRB, and the NIH do not frown on such gestures, as long as it is not an extravagant gift, but nominal and appropriate (Walden University, 2012). Therefore, the \$5 gift card was not unethical, extravagant, or inappropriate, but instead considered to be nominal and appropriate according to the standards of ethics (see Walden University, 2012).

Simon and Goes (2011) explained that a human research subject must not be coerced, threatened, or bought with any form of an extravagant gift or promise. They further argued that such extravagance would taint the findings of a research study, already causing biases. Simon and Goes recommended that participants must be informed that there is a high possibility that the research data collected from the

interviews will be published for public viewing, but they will know that their identity will be masked, confidential, and safeguarded. I advised all participants that they had a right to obtain study results once the data was analyzed and provided for their viewing in a one to two-page brief summary. Finally, no pilot study was conducted for this research.

### **Summary**

For Chapter 1 of this study, I provided introduction, background, problem statement, purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, theoretical foundations, nature, definitions, assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. In Chapter 2, I provided a literature review that highlighted various research conclusions the post release experiences and perspectives of African American women convicted of drug-related offenses with correlation to the impact on their social, behaviors, and health issues leading to recidivism. Yet gaps within research indicated common trends and themes with perspectives of African American women who had been convicted of drug-related charges and had been incarcerated but now residing in the community without any supervision.

For this chapter, I addressed the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, participant selection logic, instrumentation, pilot study procedures, recruitment, participation, data collection, data analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. Paramount to Chapter 3 is the issues of confidentiality, which I also discussed. I will address in Chapter 4 the results of the research. In Chapter 5, I will present the findings of the study; discussions, conclusions,

and recommendations for future research as well as discussion about the dissemination and disposition of the information.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

I sought to address one research question in this research study: What are the lived experiences of African American women who received, or did not receive, social supports after serving time for drug-related offenses in NYC? From this, I developed three research sub-questions:

1. What supports were received, if any, post-incarceration?
2. How did those social supports affect the reintegration into the community post-incarceration?
3. Which social support(s) did participants think affect their ability to reintegrate into the community post-incarceration?

In this chapter, I will describe the data collection setting and process. I will discuss the steps that I took to analyze the data from this research study and then present the results from the data analysis. Finally, I will discuss how the results of this study address the research question and the sub-questions.

### Setting

I met with potential participants first at a convenient local Dunkin Donuts restaurant to discuss the nature of the research study and to address any concerns or questions that they had. At this time, I also provided them with a \$5 gift card to Dunkin Donuts for their participation. I also reviewed the interview questions with them at this time so that they were familiar with the questions before the actual interview sessions. Participants expressed concern about things like the use of recording devices and the

location for the interviews, so conducting these meetings before the interview sessions was helpful for addressing these concerns.

After discussions with each participant, I made the decision to use the private conference room at my office, which was sufficiently private for all participants and a convenient location for them as well. Due to extenuating circumstances, like personal scheduling conflicts and no work on Sundays, the interview process in its entirety lasted approximately three months. I hand-recorded all interview transcripts due to participants' concerns about being audio recorded. This was a lengthy process but also allowed participants to review the transcripts as the interviews occurred for clarification purposes.

### **Demographics**

All participants in this research study were women of African-American or Afro-Caribbean ancestry. Table 2 presents the demographics of these women. They all served prison time on drug-related charges and were out of prison at the time of the study. The following biographical sketches of the participants provide rich descriptions of the circumstances of their drug use, arrests, and incarceration. They also provide the background necessary for understanding the detailed thematic analysis (TA), presented later in this chapter. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants.



Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Age at First Incarceration	Number of Arrests	Convictions
Sherry	29	Early 20s	3	1
Bobbi	44	30	unknown	1
Sheila	35	29	3	3
Harriet	36	33	1	1
Alexis	28	Early 20s	3	2
Nicole	48	34	2	1
Jennifer	43	38	2	2
Janice	37	22	4	4
Tenisha	42	28	3	3
Stephanie	53	32	1	1
Clara	54	44	1	1
Imani	39	34	1	1
Rosa	51	41years 2months	1	1
Darlene	50	36	1	1

**Participant 1: Sherry**

Sherry was incarcerated in her early 20s and served 6 years out of a 10-year sentence. She was released for good behavior at 29 years of age. She was arrested for selling marijuana. She refused a plea deal because on the day that she was arrested, she said that she did not have any drugs on her. At her trial, she was represented by a public defender, and the jury returned a guilty verdict. She described her world as coming “crashing down on me,” and later found out that her sentence was so long because she had two prior suspended sentences.

**Participant 2: Bobbi**

Bobbi went to prison when she was 30 years old for the attempted murder of a police officer. She served a 14-year sentence. At the time of her arrest, she described

being heavily drug reliant. The case was a murder-for-hire, and during her trial, the people that she trusted testified against her. During her incarceration, she received treatment for her drug addiction, which she has continued after her release.

### **Participant 3: Sheila**

Sheila was 35 years old at the time of the study. Her stepfather began sexually abusing her at the age of 10. When she told her mother, her mother warned her not to make such accusations of him and told her that she was lying. Her stepfather introduced her to drugs when she was 11 and she became addicted to them, exchanging sex with her stepfather to feed her addiction. After her aunt caught her stepfather raping her, her family turned against her and she ran away and became involved in a gang. One day, while driving under the influence, she hit and killed a child. This led to a 10-year prison sentence for manslaughter. After 6 years, she was paroled. Since that first prison sentence, police arrested her again and she was sentenced to two more prison terms. Today, she is clean and has a young daughter with a man who is currently serving time in a correctional facility; she did not specify the length of his sentence. Her aunt pays their rent and assists them with food, which supplements her ration of food stamps and use of a local food pantry.

### **Participant 4: Harriet**

Harriet was arrested in her neighborhood while helping a family member sell crack cocaine. At age 33, she was sentenced to 9 months in a correctional facility because she was a first-time offender. Though she has not been arrested since she was released from prison, she said that she did sell a couple more times before quitting

completely in 2015. She said that she was never a drug user herself and that she only sold. After she was released, she lived briefly with a friend but moved out when that friend wanted her to pay for groceries and utilities. She moved in with a family member's girlfriend, and then to a homeless shelter when her family member and girlfriend broke up. She currently lives with another friend but worries that she cannot meet her obligations of assisting with the utilities and biweekly groceries. She does not want to go back to the homeless shelter. Her friend helped her get a job with long hours at a local market, where she believes she is adequately compensated for her labor.

**Participant 5: Alexis**

Alexis is the child of two crack users, and she used crack cocaine herself all her life. Her parents were in and out of prison when she was a child, so she lived in homeless shelters growing up. She began using crack cocaine by the time she was in her midteens. She served as a middle person between the sellers in her neighborhood and the buyers in a nicer neighborhood. One of her customers raped her, and she attributes the intensification of her own drug use to this experience. In her early 20s, the police arrested her and she served prison time twice in as many years. She bargained herself out, but after her last arrest the judge sentenced her to 5 years in prison on drug possession charges. Today, she has 3 years of sobriety and is engaged to be married. She lives with her fiancé and his daughter in a two-bedroom apartment and says that they are “a happy family.”

**Participant 6: Nicole**

At the time of the study, Nicole was a 48-year-old woman who did not use drugs growing up or in early adulthood. One day, her young son was involved in an accident with his school bus and killed. She said that he was “my life, my joy, my hope, my everything” and that she could not eat or sleep following his death. Her friend suggested that she try a small amount of crack cocaine to help her through this difficult time, and she found that it had a calming effect on her. She became dependent on it, and it impacted her mood. She was 34 years of age when she arrested and pled guilty to misdemeanor charges for physical fighting, and the judge issued her a suspended 3-year sentence. Two years after the suspended sentence, however, she was arrested on felony charges, and the judge gave her a 10-year sentence. After 6 years in prison she was released to a halfway house, and she was on parole until 3 years ago. After her release she took over a local store, which she runs with two other people. She received treatment for drug addiction while she was imprisoned and continued this treatment after she was paroled. She credits the support of her family and friends with keeping her life from “heading to a horrible crash.”

**Participant 7: Jennifer**

Jennifer was 43 years old at the time of the study. She grew up in project housing in the large mid-Atlantic city and never finished high school. She said that marijuana was present in her neighborhood but that it was not a big deal until the police came in and began conducting raids in the neighborhood. She enjoyed smoking marijuana and made a good living selling the drug as well. The police arrested her during a raid 5 years ago,

and because she was already on parole, she was sentenced to 10 months in prison.

Today, she lives with her parents and attends drug rehabilitation twice a week. She is training to be a nurse's aide but is unsure of her ability to get work in that industry given her drug history. As a backup, she's learning to become a hairdresser in case she is unable to find work as a nurse's aide.

**Participant 8: Janice**

Janice was 37 years old at the time of the study and did not discuss any drug use early in life. Her husband was shot and killed by police in a routine traffic stop. Left alone with three children, she began drinking heavily to deal with her sadness and anger, and this drinking led to eventual drug use. The police targeted her neighborhood for raids because of the known crack and marijuana use in the area. She had been to prison about four times, starting from age 22. She served between 2 to 3 years each time until her most recent incarceration 2 years ago. That was when she eventually agreed to check into and stayed in a rehabilitation program as part of the condition for an early release from her 5-year prison sentence. She says that she still "want[s] justice for my husband." The support of her family during those dark times meant a lot to her, especially because they stepped in to parent her children when she was unable. She said that she had to repeatedly apologize to her kids for not being there for them.

**Participant 9: Tenisha**

Tenisha was a 42-year-old woman at the time of the study who grew up in a close-knit community in which many parents owned businesses. However, the neighborhood lacked other supports, and people in the neighborhood experienced

violence, trauma, and loss “almost on a daily basis.” She believes that the community was overpoliced yet under-resourced. Following the rape of a relative who lived with her, the sorrow and pain became too much, and she turned to hard drugs for solace. The first time she went to prison, she was 28 and served 9 months. After her third arrest she was sentenced to 5 years. After she was released, she sought help to get clean from a foundation that helps people through recovery. Today, she has been clean for about 5 years and says that she is much stronger and emotionally balanced.

**Participant 10: Stephanie**

Stephanie was a 53-year-old woman at the time of the study who was released from prison last year after serving 20 years behind bars. She said, “prison destroys; it is not a good place for human beings.” The day that she was released was extremely emotional for her because she received no parole, meaning that she was not released early and served her full sentence. She said that she felt like she walked into a world full of color, after being in a place with no color for 2 decades. Many of the people who met her at the gate were people she recognized, but who had aged while she was imprisoned. After her release, she used a cell phone and a computer for the first time in her life. She worried about being jobless, which currently contributes to a lack of sleep and general feelings of anxiety. However, she is happy to be out of prison and to never have to return there.

**Participant 11: Clara**

At the time of the study, Clara was 54 and was imprisoned for 8 years. She was arrested for selling drugs to an undercover police officer at an intersection that she

remembers well today. She had handed him a brown envelope of crack cocaine when he took her by the wrist, showed her his undercover identification, and arrested her. After 8 years in prison, she says that she “walked into a world that barely remembers me.” She was happy to have her \$100 bill returned to her that was vouchered by the prison authority the day she was sent to prison. Once she was released, however, it took time for her to find a job. She did volunteer work for a while and relied only on tips until she found a job as a cleaner nearly a year after her release. She feels like she returned to a different world, one in which her friends have moved away or died, new and taller buildings have replaced the old buildings that she remembers, and the crowds of people are larger than they were when she entered prison. Today, she has been clean for 2 years and says that she “will never go back to a life of drugs.”

**Participant 12: Imani**

Imani was 39 at the time of the study and was incarcerated for 5 years at a federal prison for selling marijuana. She recalled seeing a free man who happened to be crippled during her time in prison and envying him for being free, despite his disability. She said that today, freedom occupies her mind morning, afternoon, and night. Upon her release, she was reunited with her daughter, now a 9-year old, who hugs her tightly so that she will never leave again. Her brother and nephew brought her gifts of a laptop and cell phone, which she says opened the world to her and put it at her fingertips. Though she had several jobs lined up at her release, her probation made it difficult to maintain any of those jobs. She was able to keep a part-time job that did not interfere with her probation with the help of her mother to watch her daughter. She suffers from a herniated disc and

gets some help from a local free clinic, but their ability to help her is only minimal. She cannot afford to see a pain management specialist.

**Participant 13: Rosa**

Rosa is a 51 year old woman who spent 5 years and 8 months in prison on crack cocaine possession charges. She was released 4 years ago. She recalls her experience in prison as the most horrible of her life, but also the most valuable, and believes that the lessons she learned there will remain with her to her grave. Prior to her incarceration, she sold drugs for income when she needed to make a car payment. She says that it was a means to an end that she used only occasionally. She says that since her release, little expressions of freedom like opening her refrigerator and taking out whatever she wants to eat or changing the television channel to what she wants to watch, bring her joy. She has friends who helped her to get a job when she was released. Today, she has returned to her twin children in their 20s, who were teenagers when she left, and these relationships have been painful for her. Her children do not view her as a role model, and she says that they treat her “as a woman next door that is in need of help” as opposed to a mother figure.

**Participant 14: Darlene**

Darlene was imprisoned when she was 36-years old for marijuana and crack cocaine possession. As a repeat offender, she spent 10 years in prison. She attended a community college prior to her incarceration but she dropped out, and while she was in prison she dreamed of returning. She took advantage of the opportunity to continue coursework during her prison sentence because, as a prisoner, her tuition was free.



There, she was able to work with the latest computer and tablet technologies, and even use video-to-video features to communicate with her instructors. By the time she was released from prison 4 years ago, she only required a few more credits to graduate. She earned a degree in computer technology, and one of her professors helped her to get a job working in her field despite her status as an ex-convict. She says that her income today is better than she could imagine. She is in the process of purchasing a condo with the help of a cosigner, as her credit score plunged while she was in prison. She says that she has a new lease on life now that she is on the other side of those prison walls.

All participants described their lives before their incarceration, despite that this was not an interview question. Twelve of the 14 women spoke of the circumstances that led them to drug abuse and, ultimately, to prison. They shared this information freely, perhaps so that I would have a better understanding of where they were coming from or to tell their side of the story. From there, each began their discussion of their time spent in prison and what their lives are like following their release. In the next sections, I will describe the data analysis process and the results.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data from 14 participants, reaching data saturation at this number. Where the population is homogenous, like in my research study, data saturation is likely to be reached having collected data from between four and 12 participants (Francis et al., 2010). Data were collected in the large mid-Atlantic city. The duration of each interview was approximately 2 hours. This included three to four visits to the research site to interview participants.

I conducted face-to-face interviews with all 14 participants for data collection. Establishing rapport and getting my participants to trust me took some time, especially because I am a practicing attorney in the same city. Their initial gut feeling was to see me as a government agent trying to snitch on them. However, once I established rapport with them, they learned that I was genuine and that they could trust me because I was trying to help them through my research study. Then, it was very easy for them to open up and they were able to freely describe their true feelings, thoughts, and intentions.

I arrived at the interview with my interview protocol, and used an open-ended, conversational format. In qualitative research, the highly structured format is used primarily to gather sociodemographic information. For the most part, however, these interviews were more open ended and less structured (see Merriam, 2001). I asked the same questions of all the participants, but the order of the questions, the exact wording, and the follow-up questions varied considerably based on the stories of the participants. I was very alert to both verbal and nonverbal messages and flexible in rephrasing and pursuing certain lines of questioning. I used words that were clear and meaningful to the participants and I readily repeated and rephrased any questions that were not clear to them. I documented all interviews carefully with notes. I stopped at intervals to read back what I had written to allow them to correct or add to what they had said. Taking notes without recording was not what I envisaged. It took me longer time than audio recording or video recording.

Despite all the assurances that the recording was for me to be able to go back and play any part of our interview that I may not have remembered, participants were

adamant that they would not be audio recorded. Thus, I hand wrote verbatim their words as they spoke with me. Participants also appeared distrusting of governmental locations. When I suggested that we conduct interviews in the private room of a local library, they did not want to do this. I then suggested a local school library, but participants would not consent. Finally, participants were happy to use the private conference room of my own law office, which is where the interviews were conducted.

### **Data Analysis**

In Chapter 3, I outlined the Colaizzi method of data analysis that I would use for this research study. However, due to the challenges of building rapport and collecting data from this research population, the data that I collected were insufficient for a proper Colaizzi analysis. Instead, I used TA, an alternative method of qualitative data analysis, to analyze the data that these interviews yielded. In their seminal work, Braun and Clarke (2006) described a six-step process of TA to identify salient themes within qualitative data. This is the process that I used to analyze the data from this research study. I used NVivo (QSR, 2017), a qualitative data analysis software that assists researchers with data organization and analysis. I uploaded all interview transcripts into NVivo so that I could code them. In the first step, I read through the interview transcripts several times to immerse myself in them and to familiarize myself with what the participants said. I recorded any initial notes or impressions about the participants' experiences.

In the second step of TA, I generated the initial codes. There are two options that researchers can use for coding: in vivo coding and unique coding. In vivo coding occurs

when researchers code each passage based on the actual coded text, so the code retains its original name and associated text. In unique coding, researchers give a brief descriptive name to each piece of coded text. As I was interested in the post-release experiences of African-American women who had been incarcerated on drug charges, I coded their interviews *in vivo*. This allowed me to focus not only on what they said but also how they said it, and to really capture their experiences. To do this, I read each transcript line-by-line and coded all passages of text related to the research question. These passages were words, short phrases, sentences, or paragraphs. When I finished this initial coding, I moved to Step 3.

Step 3 of TA is to search for initial themes in the codes. In this step, I began reconstructing what participants said across all interviews. I compared all codes against all other codes and looked for similarities and differences, and I grouped codes that shared similar sentiments together. For example, Tenisha said, “I am much stronger and emotionally balanced, stable”; and Imani said, “I am not going to be a victim of circumstances twice.” Both passages expressed a similar sentiment about strength, and so I placed them into a preliminary category and gave it a preliminary thematic title called Feelings of Strength. I did this for all codes, and created a separate category called Miscellaneous for those codes that did not appear to have an initial place in the other titled categories that I developed.

Step 4 requires that researchers review the initial themes created in Step 3. In this process, I checked all initial codes from Step 2 against all initial themes from Step 3. Doing this ensured, now that I had the initial themes, the codes all made sense in the

context of those themes and that there were enough data within the codes to support the creation of those themes. If an initial theme, upon closer examination, did not have the depth or breadth of data to support it, then I no longer considered it a theme. In doing this, I also became aware that in some cases two or more initial themes expressed the same sentiments, and I collapsed them together to become one theme. Any of the initial codes that no longer fit into the themes during Step 4 were placed into a theme that better expressed the code, or into the Miscellaneous theme.

I also reexamined the Miscellaneous theme to see if any codes that I initially placed into that theme now fit better elsewhere. In this step, I also reviewed the transcripts again for any passages that I did not code in Step 2 and coded them in vivo to the appropriate theme as necessary. Finally, I examined all initial themes in relation to one another, placing two or more similar initial themes together into a larger, overarching category with a descriptive title. By doing this, I created the final overall thematic structure, with the initial themes becoming subthemes and those larger, overarching categories becoming the themes. This thematic structure is presented in Table 3. In the fifth step of TA, I gave all subthemes and themes descriptive titles that reflected the sentiments that they expressed. Step 6 of TA is to write up the research study results.

Table 3

*Thematic Structure*

Themes	Subthemes	Codes (coded in vivo)
1. Belief in Self	Hope	I have hope that it will keep getting better for as long as I lay low out of the police radar; I love my daughter so much, she gave me a new hope in life; I did not have much education but I can work as a cashier, a shop keeper, or any other available job
	Strength	I am much stronger and emotionally balanced stable; I am not going to be a victim of circumstances twice; I am in the process of buying one of the condos around my job
	Gratitude	I am glad that I have a job now; I am grateful daily for a new lease on life outside the prison walls; I am grateful for my parents and siblings who stood by me during those dark hours of my life
2. Belief in Something Outside Themselves	Blessed or Lucky	I felt like a person who just won a big lotto; little things such as just opening your refrigerator to take what you want is a blessing; I was blessed to find a job almost immediately
	Faith	I attend the Apostolic church down the road, and they have really helped me through spiritual counseling and prayers; found faith in the lord through a good man that I am currently engaged to
3. Social Supports	Continuing Rehabilitation for Drug Use	I attend a drug rehabilitation center once a week; I received drug treatment while in custody and since my release I have attended regularly; I attend a drug rehabilitation center twice a week
	Friends and Family	I live with my cousin; my mother brought me street clothes that I have not worn in decades; my brother had bought me a laptop as his welcome gift
	Government Assistance	I get voucher for groceries from welfare; I get some care from a local free clinic; I get food with food stamps
4. Lingering Concerns or Worries	Lost	I walked into a world that barely remembers me; many of my friends have moved away or are dead; [prison] is a completely different out of time reality
	No Job Prospects	I have been looking for a job but no one wants to hire me; I can work but no job for me; I am training as a nurse's aid but I fear that my drug history will put a lot of obstacles on my ability to get a salaried jobS
5. Lack of Government Support	Government Assistance with Jobs	Jobs for everyone; government to provide jobs; tax rebate for those employers who would agree to give job to ex-convicts; government can put pressure on those refusing to hire people like me even after we have been released

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In ensuring trustworthiness of my research study, I took credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability into consideration. Credibility means establishing that the results of the research are believable and depends more on the richness of the information gathered, rather than the amount of data gathered. There are many techniques to gauge the accuracy of the findings, such as data triangulation, triangulation through multiple analysts, and member checks (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I established credibility through the use of transcript review that occurred during the interview process. As I hand wrote all interview transcripts, I was able to go through all transcripts with participants at the time of the interview so that they could ensure the credibility of the data I recorded and clarify any points that I did not adequately capture.

Transferability refers to the degree in which the research can be transferred to other contexts. The reader notes the specific details of the research situation and methods and compares them to a similar situation that they are more familiar with. If the specifics are comparable, the original research would be deemed more credible (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I supplied a highly detailed description of the situation and methods that I used to show how my studies could be transferred to other situations.

Dependability refers to the stability of data over time and over conditions (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Stability can be improved over time by repetitive observation of the same event and questioning people about key issues. Dependability is an evaluation of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. In this research study, I conducted self-checking as the research

process moved forward. I also used Braun and Clarke's TA (2006) for data analysis to organize the interview responses based on themes for the interpretation of the data.

To further establish dependability, I documented all research processes, allowing a future investigator to repeat the work, if not necessarily to obtain the identical results. To do this, I completed several steps. I first outlined the research design and implementation, explaining what I planned and carried out on a strategic level. Next, I operationalized the aspect of data collection, and addressed the details of what I completed in the field. Finally, I provided a reflective assessment of the project, evaluating the potency of the process of inquiry that I carried out.

Confirmability is the question of how the research findings are supported by the data collected (Miles et al., 2014). This is a process to establish whether the researcher has been biased during the study; this is due to the assumption that qualitative research allows the research to bring a unique perspective to the study. An external researcher can judge whether this is the case by studying the data that I collected during this research. To enhance the confirmability of the initial conclusion, I ensured the completion of the audit trail throughout the study to demonstrate how each decision was made.

## **Results**

In this research study I sought to answer the following research question: What are the lived experiences of African American women who received, or did not receive, social supports after serving time for drug-related offenses in a large mid-Atlantic city? Secondly, I wanted to address three subquestions:

1. What social supports were received, if any, post-incarceration?



2. How did those social supports affect the reintegration into the community post-incarceration?
3. Which social support(s) did participants think affected their ability to reintegrate into the community post-incarceration?

Inductive TA for this research study yielded five emergent themes that addressed this research question. Theme 1 was titled belief in self and contained the subthemes hope, strength, and gratitude. Theme 2 was titled belief in something outside themselves and contained the subthemes Blessed or Lucky and Faith. Theme 3 was titled social supports and contained the subthemes continuing rehabilitation for drug use, friends and family, and government assistance. Theme 4 was titled lingering concerns or worries and contained the subthemes lost and no job prospects. Theme 5 was titled lack of government support.

### **Belief in Self**

Twelve of the 14 participants (86%) expressed some form of belief in themselves during the interviews. For six women this meant a feeling of hope for their future following their release from prison. Despite years and, in some cases, decades behind bars, they felt hopeful for the future. Sherry expressed this hope as she continued her job search, which proved challenging upon her release. Sherry said, “I did not have much education, but I can work as a cashier, a shop keeper, or any other available job.” She knew that her job prospects were not necessarily good given her lack of education and her status as an ex-convict, but she also held out hope because she knew that there were many jobs available that did not require an education that she would be very good at, if

given the chance. Darlene knew this to be the case, because she considered herself a success story. She said that based on her experience “there is hope for prisoners to have productive lives on the outside.”

Bobbi, a woman in her mid-30s and the mother of a young 2-year-old daughter, said that her daughter gives her hope. She said, “I am clean now thankfully,” and continued, “I am clean for my [2-year-old daughter]. I am not going to be like my mother. I love my daughter . . . so much. She gave me a new hope in life. She is my pillar.”

Rosa also spoke of the hope that she has now in relation to her time in prison. She said, “My time behind bars was the most horrible experience I could ever imagine, but also the most valuable of my life. The lessons that I learned will remain with me throughout my lifetime and even in my grave.” She has taken those experiences from prison and transformed them into hope for her future, and especially her relationship with her now-adult children, which has been rocky since her release. She is hopeful that her strained relationship with her children will improve, but she does not feel like they treat her as a mother as much as they do like a neighbor lady.

Participants also expressed their feelings of strength in the interviews. These feelings of strength took different forms, as some women spoke about strength in the face of staying clean and sober, while others spoke of it in terms of their successes following their release. Tenisha said, “I am much stronger and emotionally balanced stable [*sic*].” Clara said that she has “been clean for 2 years now and will never go back to a life of drugs” in a statement that shows her resolve to stay away from drugs. Imani, who spent 5

years in prison for selling marijuana, stated confidently that she is “not going to be a victim of circumstances twice.”

Darlene felt this strength begin when she was in prison and spoke of making the most of her time spent there. She took college courses while incarcerated to get a head start on her college degree. Her strength continued upon her release, and she walked in her graduation ceremony in late 2013. She “bagged a degree in computer technology,” and she is now purchasing a condominium. This strength saw her through her incarceration, release, and today as she has a degree and a stable job.

Half of the participants spoke of the gratitude that they feel now that they are no longer behind bars. They expressed gratitude for their sobriety, like Alexis, who said, “I have been clean now for 3 straight years, thank God.” Others were grateful for the support that they received from family and friends. Nicole, for example, stated that she is “grateful to my brothers and my sister, [and] my dad who believed in me,” while Janice expressed thanks for her parents and siblings for standing by her while she was imprisoned. Stephanie and Darlene were simply happy to be released from prison and free, and Stephanie added that she is happy to never return to prison.

### **Belief in Something Outside Themselves**

Eight of the 14 participants (57%) expressed in their interviews a belief in something bigger than themselves, something that extended far beyond them. For six women, this was stated in the form of feeling lucky or blessed. Three women expressed this luck in general terms, like Nicole stating that “many are not as lucky as I was,” or Stephanie saying, “I felt like a person who just won a big lotto.”

Others spoke more specifically about the small blessings that they experienced now that they are out of prison. Rosa said, “Little things such as just opening your refrigerator to take what you want is a blessing,” referring to the freedom that she now experiences to eat what she wants and when, which she was unable to do in prison. Darlene “was blessed to find a job almost immediately,” but also recognized that not everyone reentering society following prison time were as lucky as she was. Imani experienced this through the gift of technology, something to which she had no access when she was in prison. Her family members gave her a computer and cell phone, and she said that, “Both gifts opened the world to me and put it on [*sic*] my fingertips. I could Google any information because many things have changed in 10 years.”

Three participants have found faith through their churches, and this faith has helped them since their prison release. For 2 of these 3 women, the social support from their church has led them to the men with whom they are currently engaged to be married. Sherry said of her church that “they have really helped me through spiritual counseling and prayers,” and that “they have also become my social networks.” Bobbi and Alexis are currently engaged to men through the church, and Bobbi is engaged to her pastor’s son. She said, “The support I received has carried me on.” Alexis, on the other hand, met her fiancé who introduced her to church. Alexis said, “I found faith in the Lord through a good man that I am currently engaged to.”

### **Social Supports**

The social supports that the women used upon their release were varied. Four women rely on the social support that continuing drug rehabilitation provides. Two of

these women said that they began treatment for drug abuse while they were in prison. Sherry attends a drug rehabilitation meeting once a week. She said that “it is very helpful if only to listen to others’ successes or failure.” Jennifer attends a center twice a week now. She believes that she is clean now but she “will do more tests on that” to determine for certain if everything has left her system. Bobbi and Nicole also continue their drug rehabilitation treatment since their release from prison.

Four women also receive some support via government programs and other local public assistance. Most of these spoke about how minimal this support was, like when Sherry said, “I get voucher for groceries from welfare and that is it.” Sheila also receives food assistance, which she combines with trips to a local food pantry to make ends meet. Imani, on the other hand, has health concerns for which government assistance is helpful. She suffers pain from a herniated disc but cannot afford to go to a pain management clinic, so she relies on the minimal services provided by a local free clinic in her area. There, she is able to obtain prescription medications for the pain and see a doctor for checkups, but she is unable to see someone specifically to help with her hernia pain. Tenisha uses help for her recovery from a foundation that she discovered when she was released from prison.

Participants largely relied on the social support of family and friends following their release. Ten of the 14 participants (71%) used this help in various ways. Several turned to family or friends for assistance with housing. Sherry, for example, lives with her cousin and said that “in exchange for rent, I help her with housekeeping duties.” Jennifer was released from prison and moved in with her parents, where she now lives.

Sheila maintains her independence by living with her daughter because her boyfriend's aunt pays their rent and helps them with groceries. Sheila is happy with this arrangement and has a good relationship with her boyfriend's aunt.

Others spoke of the material supports that their family and friends provided after they were released. Stephanie spoke of the emotion she felt on the day she was released when her mother brought street clothes for her to wear. After years in prison she "cried so much like a baby" on the ride home because having those clothes meant so much to her. Imani's brother and nephew gifted her with a computer and cell phone, respectively, which helped her access a world that had changed while she was in prison.

Finally, the women relied on the help of friends in the community to access jobs upon their release. Rosa said that finding a job was easy. She said,

I have a lot of sympathizers who were business owners then and whose business [sic] had expanded. In fact, some of them just called to ask about my plans and if I would like to work for some time until I could find my feet again.

Similarly, Bobby "worked with the grocery store down the street" to get a job, while Harriet's friend "found me my present job as a helper at our fish market." Harriet said that the hours were early in the morning and included long days, but she's glad that her friend could help her because she is not jobless or homeless. Darlene's professor helped her get a job after she completed her degree, and Nicole took over her family's store, which she is now running successfully with the help of two other employees.

**Lingering Concerns and Worries.**

Despite their ability to draw on their own strength or the strength and support of others, half of the women still worried about their current circumstances or their futures. These concerns were expressed in two ways. The first was that of feeling lost after their release. Stephanie described feeling like society was not ready for these former prisoners to come home. She described what it was like seeing people waiting for her when she was released from prison and feeling like, though she recognized them, the fact that they were now older was a bit of a surprise for her.

This shock was also something that Clara felt. She said poignantly, “I walked into a world that barely remembers me,” which was a world that she barely recognized as well. She said that her friends were now gone, either moved away or dead, and the hustle-and-bustle of the city was overwhelming to her after being in prison for nearly a decade. She said simply, “I felt lost.”

Rosa also shared this sentiment. She was imprisoned for approximately the same amount of time as Clara and had a hard time describing what the feeling of being behind prison walls was like. She said that there was no way to explain the experience to someone who has never served time, and that it is “a completely different out-of-time reality.” These feelings of being lost seemed to occur for the women because, in prison, time seemed to stand still for them while, when for the rest of the world years passed without them.

Second, women worried about their job prospects. Although some were able to make job connections through family and friends as described above, others were less

fortunate. Sheila and Sherry experienced discrimination based on their status as ex-convicts, which meant that they were not hired for jobs to which they applied. Clara spent 10 months on the job market doing volunteer work before obtaining a paying job. She said, “I volunteered at a laundromat and had to rely on tips,” but she’s glad now that she has a job because “it helps me keep my sanity.”

Imani did not have a hard time finding a job, but her probation interfered with her ability to maintain it. She had four jobs lined up when she was released from prison, but “almost lost all of the jobs as their hours and the probation hours clashed.” She was finally able to work a part-time position that paid well and arranged for her elderly mother to watch her daughter while she was away at work or checking in with her probation officer.

Finally, Jennifer described training as a nurse’s aide, which she enjoys, but she is afraid that when she finishes her training her drug history will be a barrier to employment. She has not given up hope, though, and she has a backup plan. She is currently learning hairstyling with the dream of opening her own salon if being a nurse’s aide does not work out for her.

### **Lack of Government Support**

Five of the 14 participants (36%) expressed that they felt a lack of government support for them after they were released from prison. Bobbi and Sheila both expressed a general concern that the government could do more for women like them. As Bobbi put it, “The government can do more to help women who are released from prison. Many are not as lucky as me.”



Jennifer recognized that this would require structural changes at the policy level rather than just at the individual level. She said, “It is important to have a policy change that would give the ex-offenders real opportunities that promote success and help to reduce the going back and forth because of lack of help.” In this statement, she acknowledged that the recidivism in her community likely occurred because of a lack of overall support.

Janice recognized this and talked about similar concerns. She believed that the government failed to provide support for African-American women in her community, support that would perhaps keep them from turning to selling or using drugs to begin with. She said, “We as African American women go through so much hardship, violence, ridicule, and loss, yet there is nowhere to turn.” Additionally, she said, “In my opinion, women are arrested for drug problems, yet there is no [*sic*] services to access the necessary help to assist us to deal with the root cause of our problems.”

For Jennifer and Sheila, the problems that women like them face start before they turn to drugs, and there are not supports in place to assist them. The women are acutely aware of the challenges that they and women like them face, and of what they need in the way of assistance.

Returning from prison on the other side, these women also experienced a similar lack of support and felt that they were simply released and left to rely on themselves, their family, and their friends with no government help at all. While some women thought that the government could help with welfare and health care, the participants felt this most acutely when it came to their job prospects. Four women thought that the

government should do more to assist them with finding jobs upon their release because of their position as ex-convicts.

Sherry and Alexis thought the government could provide jobs directly to ex-convicts. Alexis said, “Coming out of prison, no one wants to hire you unless there is government intervention,” so she felt that if the government provided these jobs then this would eliminate the problem. She also thought that this could include the government providing tax breaks for employers who hire ex-convicts so that it is easier for women to get jobs. Clara thought that the government “can help returnees like me with a small loan to establish our own businesses,” which would circumvent hiring discrimination altogether. Jennifer felt like the government could do more to pressure companies to hire ex-convicts after their release to make finding a job easier.

### **Summary**

The results of this research study highlight the various ways that African-American women ex-convicts experience life post-incarceration vis-à-vis the social supports available to them. Some participants received support from the government directly, but the majority of participants (71%) relied on their extended social networks of family, friends, and church networks for support. In terms of reintegration, the social support that family, friends, and church networks provided seemed to be the most helpful. Two women, now engaged to men that they knew through their church affiliations, made these connections through the extended social network that the church provided them. Others were able to parlay the support of their friends into jobs that they may not have been able to obtain otherwise, given their ex-convict status. Still others have relied on

family and friends for housing so that they did not have to live in homeless shelters or halfway houses. In Chapter 5, I will explore these topics in greater depth and in the context of the literature on post-incarceration experiences of women.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The general problem addressed in this study was that African American women convicted for drug-related offenses face a crisis upon being released into their community after serving their prison terms (see Woodall et al., 2013). The specific problem was that it is unknown what causes the recidivism of African American women who were previously incarcerated for drug-related offenses (see Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of convicted African American women who have the potential for high recidivism rates, reentering their community, to understand the challenges they face.

This study was underpinned by research questions pertaining to the lived experiences of African American women who received, or did not receive, social supports after serving time for drug-related offenses; the social supports that were received, if any, post-incarceration; how those social supports affected reintegration into the community; and how those social supports affected the ability to reintegrate post-incarceration. I applied a qualitative research design to fully understand the lived experience of the 14 women who participated in the study. Participants were purposefully selected because they were all African American, lived in a community in the large mid-Atlantic city, were between the ages of 18 and 65, were arrested for drug-related offenses, and served prison terms in this city. Individual interviews were conducted with each participant at an agreed-upon location. The participants' responses were handwritten because the participants did not agree to the audio recording of the

interviews. I completed a line-by-line documentation of their stories and conducted an analysis of the transcripts to reveal their descriptions of the phenomena. It was through this data analysis process that I understood the essence of the participants' lived experiences.

In this final chapter of the study, I will discuss the research findings and the associated implications. The chapter will include a brief summary of my research study and the findings and how those findings support my original research questions. I will also discuss the model used to frame the study as well as the implications for practice, the limitations of the study, and my recommendations for future research.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this study, I explored the impact of social supports on recidivism. There was one central research question that guided this research study and three research subquestions that addressed the lived experiences of the women in relation to the available social support. The results of the central research question highlighted the various ways that African American women ex-convicts experienced life post-incarceration vis-à-vis the social supports available to them. While some participants received support from the government directly, the majority of participants (71%) relied on their extended social networks of family, friends, and church networks for support.

I drew on social support theory developed by Cullen (1994) as the theoretical foundation for the study. Social support is associated with how interaction helps people cope with stressful events and enhances their psychological wellbeing (Cullen, 1994). Furthermore, social support allows for shared resources within supportive association to

decrease the risk of offense and other personal pathologies by reinforcing and building internal defenses in the individual (Shoemaker & Brownell, 1984). This study revealed that those who received social support have a positive outlook on life and are likely to have low recidivism. This is important because those who do not receive social support, and in turn, develop a pessimistic outlook on life, suffer from an increased chance of returning to criminal activity on post-release (Blakeslee, 2012; Campbell, 2011; Harding et al., 2011). Campbell (2011) asserted that female ex-convicts usually have less human and social capital than other post-release convicts to build their personal confidence in accordance with acting in the best interest of attaining certain aims. This is due to the fact that their incarceration acted as a disruption of their relationship bonds, which leads to decreased overall social capital (Campbell, 2011). As such, when an individual's social capital decreases, their means become limited and their perceived value decreases accordingly, with the end result being social isolation, which breeds pessimistic outlooks on self and others, thereby increasing the risk of recidivism (Campbell, 2011).

In conjunction with the research subquestions, the central research question allowed for understanding the actual social supports received upon the women's release into their communities. As such, the depth of what these women perceived as the available support made a difference one way or the other in their post-incarceration adjustments. The social supports that affected their reintegration into the community post-incarceration included drug rehabilitation, family acceptance and support, and government support.

Participants described being hopeful and showing strength in pursuing what made them stronger and emotionally balanced and expressed gratitude for the support they received to stabilize their lives outside of prison. This finding contrasted with previous studies on the topic of community reintegration, wherein it had been determined that women returning from prison received no social supports, allowing for further destabilization in their lives (Brown, 2012; Stevens-Watkins et al., 2016). Women returning from prison often face a multitude of challenges that hinder their reintegration, including homelessness (Stevens-Watkins et al., 2016); barriers to employment (Paul-Emile, 2014); limited job prospects, such as barbering, cosmetology, and food service industries, for those who can find employment (Woodall et al., 2013); and a lack of mental health care, which is key given that many of this women come from abusive and traumatic backgrounds (Pelligrino, Zaitzow, Sothern, Scribner, & Phillippi, 2015).

However, the lack of access to social supports and programs is one of the more devastating challenges women ex-convicts face when attempting to reintegrate to society because it is the most prevalent cause in leading to an increased risk of recidivism (Barrick, Lattimore, & Visher, 2014; Meyers, Wright, Young, & Tasca, 2017). When social supports and programs do not exist, many of these women are tempted to return to criminal behavior, as it is, for many of them, the only life they know (Schiffer, 2014). Hunter and Greer (2011) revealed that those who challenge the social network and attempt to shift away from it, experience resistance or ridicule as their acts depress group cohesion. When this occurs, the larger group is apt to ostracize these women, allowing

them to return to crime and away from group morality because they no longer view themselves as part of the larger community.

Participants also reported that acceptance from family gave them optimism about life as they reintegrated into the community. This is key, in that familial support plays into the larger overall notion of the social network for these women. Family members and other close relations may be essential to successful integrations to the community after imprisonment because these associations offer both social support and control that could prevent the perpetuation of future illegal activities. Ex-offenders without positive social support and control from family members are more likely to end up indulging in immoral behaviors and activities (Woodall et al., 2013). In the process of reintegration, the role of family is imperative because it helps in assisting informal social controls such as interpersonal relationships that associate ex-prisoners with communities, families, law-abiding neighbors, and churches (Woodall et al., 2013).

This expansion to a larger network of society permits a person to build the social capital required to thrive in the long run. Most ex-prisoners find employment by such social networks because they are unsuccessful in finding jobs otherwise (Harding et al., 2011). Moreover, social capital accessed by such social networks, including access to education and training along with emotional, social, and instrumental support, may be leveraged towards the positive development of human capital to attain new knowledge and skills (Harding et al., 2011). However, familial acceptance is not always an optimal solution for reintegration because sometimes family members and other close relations may be involved in illegal activities as well (Harding et al., 2011). As such, this



combination of social and familial support formed a large portion of the participants' successful rehabilitation.

Despite the support received from their families and community, participants expressed concern about whether the government would do something about employers who discriminate against ex-convicts and reward those who would employ them so that there could be incentive to provide jobs for everyone. This fear is warranted because previous researchers have indicated that job discrimination towards ex-convicts is a common occurrence within the United States (Brown, 2012; Enos, 2012; Fiedler & Mann, 2012). According to Paul-Emile (2014), this is due in part to increased internal security, background checks, and criminal verification resulting from the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. As such, many women ex-convicts are barred from potentially higher-paying jobs, such as care for children and the elderly, financial services, and unionized trades, and are relegated to lower-level, low-income employment (Meyer et al., 2013). While many of these women have access to vocational education through cosmetology schools, many states have enacted statutes that prevent them from working in such fields (Woodall et al., 2013). These barriers made up part of the participants' lingering concerns, along with their lack of employment, fear of their past histories, and feelings of loneliness—all of which contributed to their negative attitudes in life. Despite this, participants revealed that as long as their support systems remained constant, they did not desire to return to their old lives.

### **Limitations**

I identified multiple limitations present during the course of this study. However, I addressed the limitations of this study as implicit recommendations for future research. The first limitation was the sample size. The small sample size was due to a lack of potential participants' willingness to participate. Other limitations included time, financial resources, and locale management for obtaining a representative population for my study.

### **Recommendations**

The results of this study will be valuable for future research because it provided African American women's perspectives about the challenges of reducing recidivism and stabilizing reentry processes. My first recommendation is that future researchers should conduct studies on a larger population of African American women. The convenience-based sample of 14 African American women in this study may not have consistently represented the broad spectrum of perceptions of women in this large mid-Atlantic city, the United States, or the world. Since the gaps in current and relevant qualitative research studies indicated a lack of research on African American women, Urban (2012) recommended that various ethnicities should be examined to design and implement effective recidivism prevention programs for convicted drug offenders. More study is needed in the areas of race, gender, inequalities, and recidivism.

With this study, I attempted to address gaps in the literature related to the phenomenological study of the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated African American women between the ages of 18 to 55 with drug-related problems who had been

released into their communities without supervision. Similar studies for women with similar conditions but who are released to supervision, as well as those who are 55 years and above who may or may not be under supervision post-release, would help close the gap. There are numerous problems facing African American women with drug problems that result in high recidivism and only a few were addressed in this research study.

With the advancement of education and technology, lawmakers should be open and embrace change through using the best approaches to solving the repeated incarceration of African American women and promote gender and racial equality in bringing about solutions to the problems of high recidivism. This is a recommendation that has been rooted not only in this study, but in other recent studies as well. Kendall, Redshaw, Ward, Wayland, and Sullivan (2018) recommended that more research was needed on community reentry programs, specifically qualitative research that could be used to provide context to statistical findings regarding reentry. Furthermore, Kendall et al. (2018) and Meyers et al. (2017) recommended that researchers focus on identifying social and structural factors that can potentially reduce incarceration while improving participant health.

### **Implications**

I embarked on this study in the hope that the result would be helpful in reducing recidivism among the African American women who have served time for drug-related offenses and are released into their community. My study is important in that it shows that social supports played a great role in keeping these women out of prison and those who did not have any are likely to have high recidivism. I also determined that those

who have family supports have greater outlooks than those who do not. Because these women have just been released from prison, they need financial support. As such, government support helps in reducing the rate of recidivism among this population.

Based on the findings, I developed multiple suggestions to assist these individuals during the reintegration process upon their release. My first suggestion is that drug rehabilitation should not be applied in a generic manner. Instead, drug rehabilitation should take on process that allows for various modifications to be made in relation to both the race and gender of the individual undertaking it because this will allow for a more specific approach to be focused on the individual. The second suggestion is that childcare should be provided for these individuals' children so they have an opportunity to return to the workforce. The third suggestion is that the legislation that makes it unlawful to discriminate against ex-convicts should be enforced because the lack of jobs upon returning from incarceration often makes the reintegration process difficult. My final suggestion is that adequate and low-cost housing should be provided because potential homelessness can lead to pessimism and an eventual return to criminality.

### **Conclusion**

When considering the plight of the African American women upon their return from prison and release into their community, it is evident that they face resentment and do not have much made available to them in the way of help, socially or otherwise. That many of these African American ex-convicts keep returning to a life they are comfortable with, but which, unfortunately, put them into trouble in the past, is not unexpected. It is important that help come in the form of appropriate drug rehabilitation.

To create a society of fairness, the system must help the ex-convicts across the board without limiting help to a section of society based on race and gender. Most of the research conducted in the area of drug rehabilitation has focused on men. When researchers have focused on women, they have mostly studied White women. It is high time that the help rendered to these populations of women be tailored to their specific needs.

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