

2019

# Rehabilitation for Gang-Affiliated, Male, African American Juvenile Delinquents

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Batsheva Berger

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2019

Abstract

Rehabilitation for Gang-Affiliated, Male, African American Juvenile Delinquents

by

Batsheva Berger

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

February 2019

## Abstract

Many social workers are unaware of their responsibilities related to African American, male, juvenile delinquents who have gang affiliation. Punishment by detention is detrimental to these youth because detention perpetuates criminal careers and does not rehabilitate juvenile offenders. The purpose of this action research study was to determine how social workers understood their role in the rehabilitation of gang-affiliated, African American, male juvenile delinquents. Differential association theory was used as the conceptual framework to understand the detriment of youth being incarcerated without rehabilitation. One focus group of 5 social workers was formed using purposive sampling of social workers who worked with the juvenile delinquent population in different settings. Manual transcription, hand coding, and thematic analysis were used to analyze the data. Participants explained why social workers see the population of African American, male, juvenile delinquents with gang involvement as vulnerable, reasons for gang affiliation, barriers to treatment, and how to engage this population. Findings include strategies to promote positivity within urban environments, foster a sense community in these areas, and engage clients. Recommendations were made to advocate for policy change, incorporate the arts into intervention, and to create urban beautification programs. Findings and recommendations from this study might bring about social change by providing insight into how social workers understand their role in the rehabilitation of the population of African American, male, juvenile delinquents with gang involvement and what can be done to enhance the social work involvement.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my grandfather Samuel Beller. Although he is a holocaust survivor, he never lost his faith or his love for life. My grandfather exudes strength, courage, resilience, and love. He was my biggest supporter throughout this doctoral process. I hope I make you proud.

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To my dear children, nothing in the world can compare to the way I feel every morning when I wake up and remember that I get to be your mother. I will always cherish the hours I spent sitting on the rocking chair in your room doing my schoolwork while watching you sleep. Always remember, shoot for the moon, if you miss you will have still made it to the stars. I love you and am so proud of you.

To my dear parents and grandparents, thank you for teaching me that my capabilities are limitless. Thank you for being my cheer squad and always reminding me that no matter the adversity, hardship, or struggles I face I can still reach my goals.

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## Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review .....	1
Introduction.....	1
Problem Statement .....	2
Purpose Statement.....	4
Research Question .....	4
Key Terms.....	5
Nature of the Project .....	6
Methodology.....	7
Action Research Terminology .....	7
Significance of the Study .....	8
Theoretical/Conceptual Framework.....	9
Values and Ethics.....	10
Literature Review.....	13
Juvenile Delinquent .....	13
School-to-Prison Pipeline .....	14
Gangs	16
Juvenile Justice System.....	17
Punishment.....	20
Rehabilitation.....	21
Disproportionate Minority Contact.....	22
Summary.....	23
Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection .....	25



Research Design.....	25
Operational Definitions.....	26
Methodology.....	27
Participants.....	28
Instruments.....	29
Data Collection Procedures.....	29
Data Analysis.....	30
Ethical Procedures.....	31
Summary.....	32
Section 3: Presentation of the Findings.....	33
Data Analysis Techniques.....	34
Findings.....	37
Sample Characteristics.....	37
Themes.....	38
Cultural Competence.....	38
Giving Voice to Youth.....	43
Fostering Community.....	47
Building on Strengths.....	51
Increasing Positive Social Support.....	52
Unexpected Findings.....	53
Summary.....	54

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social  
Change .....56  
Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice .....58  
Recommendations for Social Work Practice .....59  
Implications for Social Change.....62  
Summary .....64  
References .....65  
Appendix: Guided Interview Questions for Focus Group .....82

## Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Juvenile delinquency poses a concern for communities (Bartollas & Schmallegger, 2014). There are differing opinions on how to best intervene with these youth. A large representation of the juvenile delinquent population consists of gang-affiliated youth (Takahashi & Evans, 2017). Pyrooz and Sweeten (2015) concluded that African American males are overly represented within the gang population. These African American, gang-affiliated youths receive little or no positive rehabilitation when convicted of a crime. Rather, they are sent to juvenile detention facilities where they are incarcerated with other delinquents. Youth of this demographic are at great risk for a perpetuated criminal career (Dong & Krohn, 2016). Thus, it is prudent to discover what social workers' roles are in helping these youth rehabilitate to prevent ongoing criminal careers.

The project was conducted using action research methodology. One focus group of five social workers who work with this population were assembled for the study. The outcome has the potential for social change implications by way of social workers recognizing what their responsibilities are in the rehabilitation of gang-affiliated, African American, male, juvenile delinquents.

This section contains an introduction, problem statement, purpose statement and research question, nature of the doctoral project, significance of the study, theoretical frameworks, literature review, and summary.

## **Problem Statement**

Juvenile crime is prevalent in all communities (Tyler, 2015). Davis and Sorenson (2010) reported that the rate of gang-affiliated, African American, male youths offending and being incarcerated is significantly higher than their European American counterparts. Juvenile crime is being addressed using a punitive approach of intervention as opposed to a clinical, rehabilitative approach (Artello, Hayes, Muschert, & Spencer, 2015). Therefore, there is a need to understand the role social workers play in the rehabilitation of African American, male, juvenile delinquents with gang involvement. Nominal research exists about how social workers can work together with the justice system to rehabilitate these youngsters in a manner that will reduce the rate of recidivism. To understand how social workers can be involved in the rehabilitation of these gang-affiliated, African American, male, juvenile offenders, an awareness of what skills must be developed with this population is essential. Gaps in the literature prevent social workers from recognizing their roles and responsibilities in the rehabilitation of this population.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP, 2016) reports data on the vast amount of youth who are held in detention facilities in the United States. Approximately 60,000 juvenile offenders are not living at home, with 40% of the juvenile detention population being African American males (Brame, Bushway, Paternoster, & Turner, 2014). These youths are being held in residential placement facilities such as juvenile detention and corrections facilities (OJJDP, 2016). Of these placements, 80% of the facilities hold a mix of both violent and nonviolent juvenile offenders, with

approximately 45% of facilities admittedly using confinement measures with the youngsters (Hockenberry, Wachter, & Sladky, 2016). The OJJDP (n.d.) further asserted that African American, adolescent males have greater involvement in criminal acts than European American youth of the same age and gender. Despite these findings, there is little research about how social workers can be involved in community-based rehabilitation for gang-affiliated, African American, male, juvenile offenders as opposed to incarceration to prevent recidivism.

Many youth who are incarcerated end up recidivating back to detention centers as opposed to developing skills to becoming productive members of society (Lambie & Randell, 2013). Many of the circumstances that lead to juvenile delinquency are social (Palermo, 2013; Teasely, 2014; Tyler, 2015). Youth involved in gangs are at a significantly higher risk of offending than those who are not gang-affiliated (Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, & Kosterman, 2014). Further, Gilman et al. (2014) recognized that a risk factor for joining gangs and engaging in criminal behavior is living in communities that are highly populated by gangs. In this project, I sought to contribute to social change by providing a basis for social workers to understand what their role is to help these youth break the cycle of crime and to become productive members of society.

As a student intern at an out-of-district placement for youth, I encountered many gang-affiliated, African American youth. Many of these youngsters had interactions with the law and were cycling in and out of juvenile detention facilities. During meetings with other social workers, teachers, and the psychologist working at the school, it became apparent there was an overall frustration about the punitive approach to criminal behavior

with the aforementioned population. The team of professionals discussed the need for these youngsters to be taught skills and strategies to help them resist criminal behavior. Therefore, I recognized this need as a social work practice problem and chose to conduct an action research project to understand how social workers view their role in the rehabilitation of gang-affiliated, African American, male, juvenile offenders. The results of the project could be beneficial for social workers to gain an understanding of how they can work with this population to prevent reincarceration.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this action research study was to explore social workers' roles in the juvenile justice system and rehabilitation of African American, male, juvenile offenders who have gang involvement. Prior to conducting the study, it was necessary for me to understand what risk factors lead to gang involvement and delinquent behavior. Further, it was imperative to recognize what skills these youth are lacking that lead to gang involvement and delinquent behavior. When exploring social workers' roles when intervening with this youth population, skills acquisition must be considered. To discover social workers' roles in the rehabilitation of gang-affiliated, African American, youth offenders, I conducted a review of the existing literature, as well as a focus group.

### **Research Question**

The research question informing the analysis for this project was the following: How do social workers understand their role in the rehabilitation of gang-affiliated, African American, juvenile offenders? I collected relevant data from existing literature,

as well as asked open-ended questions in one focus group consisting of five social workers who all work with the above-mentioned juvenile population.

Researchers have identified the need to understand what factors contribute to African American, male youth joining gangs. Once imbedded in a gang, the criminological outcome of the youngster increases significantly (Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Piquero, 2012). Living in a community with high gang involvement heightens the risk of an African American, male youngster joining a gang (Gilman et al., 2014). Further research into what role social workers play in the rehabilitation of gang-affiliated, African American, male, juvenile offenders was necessary and will contribute to professional social work practice. I hope to assist social workers in clarifying what their roles are in conjunction with the juvenile justice system to rehabilitate African American, male, juvenile offenders with gang affiliation. Additionally, they can use the knowledge gained in this capstone to help remediate juvenile offenders of other races and gender.

### **Key Terms**

*Gang:* A youth gang is a self-formed group of youngsters who engage in criminal acts (Franzese, Covey, & Menard, 2016).

*Juvenile delinquent:* A young person who engages in acts that would be considered criminal if done by an adult (Brezina & Agnew, 2015; Burfeind & Bartusch, 2015; Nisar, Ullah, Ali, & Alam, 2015).

*Juvenile justice system:* System of courts and institutions that handle cases involving a juvenile defendant (Zimring, Langer, & Tanenhaus, 2015).

*Juvenile recidivism:* Measured by criminal acts, such as new law violations, both misdemeanor and felony offenses. These criminal acts could result in rearrest, reconviction, or return to juvenile detention facilities with or without a new sentence (Looman & Abracen, 2010).

*Incarceration:* Confinement to prison or jail or where individuals are locked up overnight (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2017).

*Punitive:* Intended as punishment or discipline (Brezina & Agnew, 2015).

*Rehabilitative:* Preparing an offender for a productive life (Gifis, 2016).

*Recidivism:* Reoffend (Doherty, 2015). The "repetition of criminal behavior." (Langrehr, 2011, p. 23) and/or continued association with the legal system for a new criminal offense, including a misdemeanor or higher offense.

### **Nature of the Project**

Stakeholders have insight into the topic being studied based on their experiences. Action research involves these stakeholders in the research process (Stringer, 2014). The researcher assumes the role of colearner with participants who have experience with the population being researched. Action research is practice-based research. Practice in action research is understood as both action and research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Action research contributes to social and cultural change through the improvement of practice as defined.

Action research contributes to social and cultural change by holding stakeholders accountable for their actions and assuming responsibility for creating change (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). Social workers who work with the gang-affiliated, African American,



male, juvenile delinquent community were recruited for a focus group. Through the use of action research for this project, social workers will be compelled to claim responsibility and be held accountable for the intervention efficacy of gang-affiliated, male, African American, juvenile delinquents.

### **Methodology**

Using an action research approach to this project provides social workers who work with the gang-affiliated, African American, juvenile delinquent population an understanding of how to best use clinical services to intervene with this population. Action researchers recognize the unique knowledge stakeholders contribute to the research (Stringer, 2007). When exploring the role and responsibility of a social worker in the rehabilitation of the gang-affiliated, African American, juvenile delinquent population, social workers were selected to contribute in the focus group.

Data were obtained by asking questions to one focus group of five social workers from different agencies. Participants were invited to join the group via e-mail. The group met a total of one time to discuss how they viewed their role in the rehabilitation of gang-affiliated, African American, male, youth offenders. Participants were required to sign a consent form before the meeting of the group. I compiled a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions for participants to complete during the group time. Responses were discussed. Open discussion on the topic was also allowed and encouraged.

### **Action Research Terminology**

*Colearner*: Stakeholders and researcher learning together (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

*Data:* The information that was collected.

*Facilitator:* The person who leads the focus group and the research (Stringer, 2014).

*Participants:* People who can speak for the interest of the stakeholders, or stakeholders themselves (Stringer, 2014).

*Stakeholders:* The people who are most directly affected by the issues (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010).

### **Significance of the Study**

There is a disproportionate use of punitive measures in the juvenile justice system between African American and European American juvenile offenders (Cochran & Mears, 2014). Although there has been a decrease in the disproportionate number of minority confinement (Davis & Sorenson, 2010), disparities still exist between the use of punitive versus rehabilitative intervention methods between African American and European American young offenders (Cochran & Mears, 2014). Through this project, I sought to understand social workers' viewpoint about their roles regarding service delivery for African American, male, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation. Further, it is important to explore challenges associated with providing effective social work interventions for this population.

In this action research study, I sought to clarify social workers' responsibilities in providing rehabilitative interventions for gang-affiliated, African American youth who have been incarcerated. The study will contribute to social work practice by helping social workers understand their roles and responsibilities in the rehabilitation of this

youth population. Further, the study will contribute to policy and foster positive social change by allowing stakeholders to recognize the importance of using rehabilitative measures through the use of social work intervention when intervening with gang-affiliated, African American, male youth who have been incarcerated, as opposed to using purely punitive measures.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Many theories can be used to understand delinquent behavior. Siegel (2010) wrote that social learning theory, developed by Bandura, can help to comprehend delinquent behavior based on behavior modeling. The premise of social learning theory is that behavior is learned. Although this theory can be used to guide the research, it is a general theory of crime and is often used to understand a range of criminal behaviors (Akers & Sellers, 2004). Alternatively, differential association theory (DAT) explains deviance as coming via social associations. The social groups that a youngster associates with provides a context for the behaviors the youth defines as either acceptable or unacceptable (Akers & Sellers, 2004). When understanding delinquency within the specific group of gangs, DAT was found to be the most appropriate theoretical framework to follow.

DAT was first developed by Sutherland in 1939 and was then revised in 1947. According to Sutherland's theory, just as any behavior is learned, so is criminal behavior (as cited in Burgess & Akers, 1966). Delinquency, as understood using a DAT perspective, occurs because of the individual's contact with other criminal behavior patterns. A youngster who is continuously surrounded by persons who are engaging in

criminal acts will likely offend (Sutherland, Cressey, & Luckenbill, 1995). The crime rate of a group is directly related to how organized the group is for, or against criminal behavior. Street gangs in inner-city areas have reportedly high rates of delinquency among youth of all ages because of culturally transmitted favorability toward criminal behavior (Matsueda, 2001). Positive peer reactions toward an individual engaging in criminal actions serve to reinforce the delinquent behavior (Klemp-North, 2007). Alternatively, if the youngster is part of a group that is organized against criminal behavior, he or she will be at reduced risk for delinquency (Agnew, 2001; Klemp-North, 2007; Matsueda, 2001).

DAT was useful for this capstone in understanding how the gang culture of violence (Klemp-North, 2007) can perpetuate delinquency among gang-affiliated, African American, male youth. Recognizing that peer influence affects the criminal behavior of these youngsters can help social workers to recognize interventions that focus on encouraging gang-affiliated, African American, male, youth offenders to interact with positive peer influences who abstain from criminal activity. By using DAT as a theoretical framework, social workers can better understand why youth who have been incarcerated due to interacting with others who encourage criminal behavior have a higher rate of recidivating back to prison both as juveniles and as adults (Aizer & Doyle, 2015).

### **Values and Ethics**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017) code of ethics provides a guideline of values and ethics that must be upheld by social workers. First, the

code highlights the importance of social workers promoting social justice for clients. Further, it is a social worker's obligation to enhance the wellbeing of all people and communities and meet the basic needs of individuals and groups. To understand how social workers can promote social justice for gang-affiliated, African American, male youth who have been incarcerated while meeting the needs and enhancing the wellbeing of this group of people, several ethical considerations must be taken into consideration.

Social workers seek to challenge social injustice, particularly on behalf of oppressed, marginalized, or vulnerable individuals and groups. Further, the social change efforts of a social worker include issues related to discrimination, oppression, and cultural and ethnic diversity. In addition to providing access to resources and information to promote social justice, social workers also strive to promote social justice by ensuring equality of opportunity for all people (NASW, 2017).

The project directly supports this ethical value of social justice. I sought to generate knowledge on social workers' roles in the rehabilitation of gang-affiliated, African American, juvenile offenders. By intervening in a therapeutic manner, the social worker will be striving to create equal opportunity for the client, therefore upholding this value of the NASW (2017) code of ethics.

The second ethical value of the NASW (2017) code of ethics being addressed is dignity and worth of a person. It is the duty of a social worker to "respect the inherent dignity and worth of a person" (NASW, 2017, p. #6). Part of this value is recognizing the clients' capacity for change and helping foster this change. By broadening the knowledge of the social workers' role in bringing about change for clients of this population, I am

directly supporting this value of the NASW code of ethics. Included in the value of dignity and worth of a person is the need for social workers to recognize their dual responsibility to both the client and society. By conducting this project and thereby recognizing the role of social workers in intervening with the mentioned population, society benefits as well. Living in communities that are riddled with crime due to gangs increases the risk of a youngster joining a gang and offending (Gilman et al., 2014). By intervening to reduce the rate of crime and recidivism, social workers are working on behalf of both the client and communities to create safe neighborhoods.

Through this action research study, I sought to increase fellow social workers' and my level of competence through education into how social workers can effectively intervene with the mentioned population. The social work value of competence encompasses the development and enhancement of the professional expertise of a social worker (NASW, 2017). By understanding how social workers perceive their roles and responsibilities in the rehabilitation of previously incarcerated, gang-affiliated, African American, male, juvenile delinquents, I made recommendations for modification that contribute to the knowledge base of the profession. Further, information uncovered through the literature review and action research process will serve to enhance the knowledge of those in the social work community. Social workers can use the knowledge gleaned from this action research project in both advocacy and clinical social work practice.

## Literature Review

Information included in the literature review was synthesized from many different research sources. Data and statistics were found on the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's website. Walden University's library was used to find peer-reviewed articles. EBSCO databases such as ProQuest and Psycharticles were used.

Further, I read through hundreds of web versions of social work articles to find appropriate information. Keywords such as *African American gang-affiliated juvenile delinquents*, *juvenile justice system*, *rehabilitation methods*, and *recidivism* were used individually or conjunctively to yield search results. I also tried to limit my research to information no older than 2013. When necessary, I did include more dated studies.

### Juvenile Delinquent

A juvenile delinquent is a minor under the age of 18 who engages in criminal acts that are punishable for breaking the law (Binder, Geis, & Bruce, 2001; Brezina & Agnew, 2015). Historically, any act that would be considered a crime if conducted by an adult was thought to be a delinquent act if done by a minor. The exception is murder. For youth who are 15 years old and older, voluntary manslaughter, kidnapping, rape, and aggravated assault are no longer considered acts of delinquency and are punishable as an adult (Binder et al., 2001). All other criminal acts conducted by a minor are classified as acts of delinquency and are handled within the juvenile justice system, as opposed to adult court.

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2017), approximately 920,600 minors under the age of 18 were arrested. These youngsters are at

risk for delinquency due to factors such as socioeconomic status, gang affiliation, and poor parental involvement (Palermo, 2013). Knoll (2015) pointed out the disparity between male and female juvenile offenders. Statistically, males are more than twice as likely than their female counterparts to be arrested within a given period (Baglivio, Jackowski, Greenwald, & Howell, 2014; Knoll, 2015; Sanchez & Lee, 2015). Researchers attribute this discrepancy to the lack of self-control exhibited by male offenders, compared to the impulse control of females (Barrett, Ju, Katsiyannis & Zhang, 2015; Shulman, Harden, Chein & Steinberg, 2015; Steketee, Junger, & Junger-Tas, 2013). According to Brezina and Agnew (2015), because a minor's brain is less developed than that of an adult, juveniles are less capable of understanding the consequences of their actions. Thus, the juvenile justice system handles matters about youth, as opposed to the harsher implications of the adult court system (Brezina & Agnew, 2015).

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

In 2000, as many as 3 million school suspensions and 97,000 expulsions were reported in the United States (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2013). There is a large amount of youth who are getting entangled in the school-to-prison pipeline (Artello et al., 2015). Wilson (2014) defined the school-to-prison pipeline as the relation between engagement of youth in crime and educational exclusion. With the rise of school suspensions over the past several decades, as well as the heightened security measures and placement of police officers in schools, in-school arrests have become more commonplace (Kupchik & Alleyne, 2017). Previously, minor misbehaviors such as



insubordination and defiance of authority would have resulted in the student being sent to the principal's office or sitting detention. Suspension is being used as a method for addressing these trivial disobediences. Depriving youth of educational opportunities by excluding them from school has been identified as a risk factor for juvenile justice involvement, as well as a host of negative developmental outcomes (Gregory, Skiba, Mediratta, 2017; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). Schiff (2013) asserted that many youths who are suspended for nonviolent offenses are being referred from the school system to juvenile justice agencies.

Minor misbehaviors that previously have been addressed in the school system are now cause for arrest. Zero tolerance policies that call for a punishment and exclusionary approach to discipline (Gonzalez, 2015; Skiba, 2014) limit the disciplinary options of school staff (Schiff, 2013). In 2006, approximately 7% of school-aged children had been suspended at least one time (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014). School expulsions accounted for roughly 102, 077 students (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014). Researchers noted the disproportionate rates that African American male students experience zero-tolerance policies (Gonzalez, 2015; Heilbrun, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2015; Morris & Perry, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014). African American male students are three times more likely than their European American counterparts to experience zero tolerance policies such as suspension and school expulsion. Although African American males only comprised 15% of the students in the data collection, 35% of these youth had been suspended at least once, 44% had been suspended more than once, and 36% had been expelled (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014).

School enrollment is a suppressant to delinquency because of the structured environment. School exclusion due to suspension and/or expulsion increases the number of time youngsters spend unsupervised, which may lead to delinquent behavior (Gonzalez, 2015; Kupchik & Alleyne, 2017; Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014; NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2013; Skiba et al., 2014). The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (2013) reported that the disruption in education by the youngster not being in school only serves to frustrate the youth and perpetuate the continued bad behavior. Many of these adolescents turn to crime at a young age. Once incarcerated for their crime(s), they often do not return to the school system. Thus, the recidivism rate back to the juvenile justice system for juvenile offenders is increased (Teasley, 2014). Therefore, zero tolerance policies can have direct ramifications to gang involvement.

### **Gangs**

Gangs are defined as a group of people whose behavioral norms run counter to the behavioral norms of the larger society (Cloward & Ohlin, 2013). Gangs typically have rigid internal structures with clearly identified leadership. A gang will claim control over specific territories in the community. If a rival gang infringes on their territory, the gang will usually respond with violence. The term "gang war" has been coined for when rival gangs engage in violent disputes (Sanders, 2017).

Merrin, Hong, and Espelage (2015) found that youngsters who felt a sense of belonging within the school system are more likely to desist from gang involvement. Comparatively, youth who are suspended, expelled, or otherwise ostracized from

educational opportunities at school are at higher risk for joining gangs. Data collected from 2007 through 2012 showed a marked increase in gangs and gang membership amongst youth across the nation (Egley, Howell, & Harris, 2014). As of 2012, there were a total of 30,700 gangs across the United States with a membership of approximately 850,000 members (Egley, Howell, & Harris, 2014). An estimated 30% of all law enforcement responding agencies reported gang-related activity (Egley, Howell, & Harris, 2014). Disproportionate amounts of serious offenses by juveniles have been done by gang-affiliated youth (Chu, Daffern, Thomas, Ang, & Long, 2013). There is a positive correlation between gang affiliation and delinquency. Many youngsters did not have high rates of delinquent behavior before joining a gang. However, once joining the gang, their delinquency rate increased.

Upon leaving the gang, the individual's delinquency rate was reduced as well. Thus, juvenile delinquency is at its peak for those with active gang membership (O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, & Thomas, 2013; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993). Many of these crimes are committed for no reason other than "the hell of it" (Nisar et al., 2015, p. 4).

### **Juvenile Justice System**

Until the 1800s, youth who were considered rowdy, unmanageable, or delinquent, were either given a condoned whipping or were sent to adult prisons. These facilities were rat infested, unsafe, and had deplorable conditions (Springer & Roberts, 2011). During these times, youngsters aged 7 years and up were considered old enough to stand

trial for offenses ranging from theft, violence, vandalism, parental abuse, and neglect (Bilchik, 1999; Juvenile Crime, Juvenile Justice, 2001).

Before the Progressive Era, there were no separate juvenile justice systems for youth offenders. Delinquent youth were handled either in the adult criminal justice system or houses of refuge (Amdur, Davidson, Mitchell, & Redner, 2013). Houses of refuge were modeled after poor houses as alternatives to prisons. Youth were held in a residential setting that was meant to remove them from the negative environments that contributed to the behavior in the first place (Amdur et al., 2013). They functioned under a model of strict education, hard work, and stringent discipline. The premise was that rehabilitation would come through these strict guidelines as opposed to through love and care. By the 1840s, approximately 25 houses of refuge were in existence around the country (Springer & Roberts, 2011). Each house of refuge contained between 200 to 1,000 youth (Springer & Roberts, 2011). Houses of refuge became an institutional warehouse for marginal youth with little efficacy in rehabilitation. Further, the houses were wrought with overcrowding, staff abuse, and unsafe conditions that caused them to become obsolete (Springer & Roberts, 2011). Reformers began to search for other solutions of how to handle delinquent youth (Amdur et al., 2013).

Jane Addams and Julia Linthrop were advocates for legislation that resulted in the first juvenile court to open in Cook County, IL in 1899 (Springer & Roberts, 2011; Thompson & Morris, 2015). By 1925, every state other than Wyoming and Maine had a functioning juvenile court (Juvenile Crime, Juvenile Justice, 2001). The focus of these courts was rehabilitation, rather than punishment. Early juvenile justice systems

considered the youngster's underdeveloped moral, social, emotional, and intellectual abilities and focused on treatment and rehabilitation as opposed to punishment (Thompson & Morris, 2016).

Although the federal government began to take notice of juvenile justice in 1912 (OJJDP, n.d.), no official acts related to juvenile delinquency were passed by Congress until 1960 (Olsen-Raymer, 1983). Since the original enactment of the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Control Act in 1961, it has been amended, renewed, and renamed several different times (Olsen-Raymer, 1983). With the passage of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA, 1974), the juvenile justice system maintained almost full control over the handling of juvenile delinquency (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). At this point, the justice system functioned both as preventative and as a control for delinquency. Youth who were deemed to be predisposed toward delinquency were held for status offenses such as truancy or noncriminal misbehavior. As the justice system was subject to criticism, amendments were added to the JJDPA, which stated that the justice system could only intervene once a delinquency has taken place as opposed to preventatively (Hawkins & Weis, 1985).

The juvenile justice system has begun to reflect the adult justice system (Thompson & Morris, 2016). Although mirroring the adult justice system has proven to be beneficial to the preservation of rights for these young offenders, it has also brought along a more punitive approach for dealing with juvenile lawbreakers. Since adopting practices like the adult systems, the juvenile justice system has been incarcerating youth at an increased rate (Thompson & Morris, 2016). According to Aizer and Doyle (2015),

over 130,000 juveniles are detained in the United States every year with 70,000 youngsters in detention facilities on any given day. Estimated data from over 35,000 young offenders link incarceration of juveniles to reduced school completion rates and increased adult incarceration rates (Aizer & Doyle, 2015). A juvenile justice system that focuses on incarceration and punishment can be disruptive to youth (Aizer & Doyle, 2015; Thompson & Morris, 2016).

### **Punishment**

Researchers have indicated the dysmaturity of the adolescent frontal lobe and prefrontal cortex. These portions of the brain are what affects planning and self-control in youth. Comparative to adults, minors are more likely to be impulsive and disregard long-term ramifications and consequences (Monahan, Steinberg, & Piquero, 2015). When considering how to intervene with young offenders, these factors should be taken into consideration. Interventions that focus on discipline and control have been found to be ineffective (MacKenzie & Farrington, 2015). Punishment-based programs that use boot-camp mentality and harsh discipline as a method of rehabilitation have shown poor outcomes (Young, Greer, & Church, 2017). Nisar et al. (2015) examined the increased “get-tough” attitude of the juvenile justice system, which results in more youngsters being transferred to adult courts and prisons, as opposed to receiving rehabilitative exposure.

In 2015, approximately 82,940 juvenile offenders between the ages of 12 and 18 were not living at home (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzanchera, 2017). These youths were being held in residential placement facilities, such as juvenile detention facilities

and corrections facilities (Campaign for Youth Justice, 2016). On average, 21% of all youth who are brought before the courts on juvenile offenses are imprisoned. Hoy et al. (2016) discussed the correlation between youth being incarcerated and their further entrenchment into street life and the juvenile justice system. Hoy et al. posited that incarceration does little to rehabilitate the youth and increases their risk of behaviors that lead to further imprisonment. Raphael (2014) argued that putting youngsters behind bars for delinquent behavior can have negative effects on educational and productivity outcomes for these youngsters that will only lead to continued offending.

### **Rehabilitation**

Keeping juvenile offenders in the community, while administering intensive intervention, can increase the youngster's chances of successful rehabilitation (May, Osmond, & Billick, 2014). The likelihood of a juvenile delinquent reoffending was 2.12 times greater for those who were sentenced to detention facilities, as opposed to those who received in-home probation (Ryan, Abrams, & Huang, 2012). Alternatively, interventions with a focus on skills training and restorative methods have been proven to be effective in the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquent youth (MacKenzie & Farrington, 2015).

Rehabilitation groups serve to teach youth skills for managing their aggression and have been attributed to a reduction in violent behavior. Interpersonal skills training and conflict resolution techniques are complementary interventions used to change the mental processes and interpersonal behavioral strategies that lead youngsters to engage in deviant behaviors (OJJDP, 2011). The skills targeted through these interventions include

anger management techniques, conflict resolution skills, problem identification, and social resistance training. While helping to decrease problem behaviors, these interventions also promote cooperative behavior and can help youth form positive peer alliances (OJJDP, 2011; Trupin, 2007).

Wong, Bouchard, Gravel, Bouchard, and Morselli (2016) examined which strategies of restorative rehabilitation were most successful in the rehabilitation of delinquent youth and the reduction of recidivism. Although the analysis proved that restorative justice measures that serve to hold the offender accountable for his/her action are more effective than punitive measures such as incarceration, there were limitations of sample size and exclusion criteria. Furthermore, the literature lacked the support of peer-reviewed articles. Hence, the need for the proposed study as a tool for policy change.

Limited literature about rehabilitation options for African American, male, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation was available.

### **Disproportionate Minority Contact**

Disproportionate minority contact (DMC) in the juvenile justice department is an issue (Center for Children Law and Policy, 2010) because, according to the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (2016), minority youth are at greater risk for incarceration, and African American male youth are often connected to gangs and drugs. Also, the juvenile justice system has racially skewed outcomes, often incriminating a youth of color of a crime that a European American adolescent may merely receive a warning (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2016). In addition to African American youth receiving excess punitive responses to crime compared to



European American youth, African American, male, juvenile delinquents have a decreased likelihood of receiving rehabilitative interventions (Cochran & Mears, 2014; Fader, Kurlychek, & Morgan, 2014).

In Baltimore, Maryland, 18 European American youth were arrested for drugs, while 86 African American youth were detained for the same crime. The ratio of violent crimes committed by youth of color versus White youth is 3:2, with the ratio of incarceration being 4:1 (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2016). Race plays a large role in decisions within the juvenile justice system. Researchers theorize that specific court jurisdictions attribute higher levels of culpability and lower potential for reform and rehabilitation of African American youth than for European American offenders of the same crimes (Fader et al., 2014). With some social workers identifying alternatives to incarceration for African American male juvenile offenders with gang affiliation and advocating for change, these youngsters will be given the same opportunities as their European American counterparts.

### **Summary**

Juvenile crime and delinquency is a social issue that places an emotional toll on the greater society (Pardini, 2016). There are many risk factors to youth becoming delinquent. Through the extensive literature review, I gave insight into the history, scope, and intricacies of the problem.

For this research project, I chose to focus on African American, male gang-affiliated juvenile delinquent population. According to Omboto, Ondiek, Odera, and Ayugi (2013), the issues that caused these youngsters to be incarcerated are often not

properly addressed behind bars. Thus, I researched how social workers perceive their roles and responsibilities in rehabilitating these youth. This section of the capstone discussed the issue of African American male juvenile delinquents who have gang affiliation, how delinquency could be understood through DAT, and implications of the study to the social work community, juvenile justice system, and this delinquent youth population. While conducting the literature review, the main gap is the lack of therapeutic involvement for African American male juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation because the justice system uses a primarily punitive approach when intervening with this population. Thus, these youngsters are not given the opportunity to gain new skills, foster positive peer interactions, and learn how to resist future recidivism.

The next section describes a plan to conduct a focus group of social workers who work with African American juvenile delinquent males with gang affiliation. I sought to determine how social workers view their role and responsibilities toward this population. Further, through my research, I hope to contribute to social work clinical practice by providing a framework for best practice when working with this vulnerable population.

## Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

The purpose of my project was to understand the role and responsibility of social workers in the rehabilitation of African American, gang-affiliated, juvenile delinquents. Through this research, I hope to inform social workers about the importance of their role when intervening with this population. Social workers may face micro, mezzo, and macro challenges when working with African American youth who have gang affiliation and juvenile justice involvement. In this section, I will discuss the research design for the project, the methodology for data collection and analysis, who the participants were, how the participants were recruited, and ethical procedures to ensure the protection of all participants. Groves et al. (2009) explained that the purpose of delineating the methods is to allow others to replicate the procedures within the study and concur with the conclusion.

### **Research Design**

Juvenile delinquency is prevalent in communities around the world (Shoemaker, 2017). Being involved in a gang is a predictor of an individual offending (Dong & Krohn, 2016). Pyrooz and Sweeten (2015) indicated that youth gang membership is disproportionately African American. Thus, it is imperative to discover how social workers perceive their role in the rehabilitation of African American, gang-affiliated, juvenile delinquents to circumvent continued criminal careers.

Qualitative researchers recognize the importance of each participant's contribution to the research process (Roller, 2015). Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire (2003) explained that action research could be used for social justice goals through

empowerment. When targeting an issue, the researcher can empower the participant group to advocate for the issue on a broader spectrum. Because I sought to examine social workers' understanding of the issue and how they can help the problem, input from professionals who already intervene with this population was invaluable. Further, I attempted to empower participants to advocate for change on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

### **Operational Definitions**

Babbie (2016) explained that operationally defining each variable will help to maintain the intended definition of these key factors as opposed to leaving it up to the interpretation of the reader.

*Delinquency:* According to Babbie (2016), delinquency is an individual under the age of 18 being convicted of a crime.

*Gang affiliation:* Belonging to a group of youngsters who create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation as well as engage in criminal activity.

*Interpersonal skills:* How people relate and interact with one another (Barakat, 2007).

*Juvenile justice system:* The court and institutional system by which young offenders are handled (Zimring, Langer, & Tanenhaus, 2015).

*Policy:* Actions to accomplish a goal such as the government's choice to either change or maintain a status quo (Howlett & Cashore, 2014).

*Previous incarceration:* Being convicted of a crime and sentenced to prison time.

*Recidivism:* The reconviction to a detention facility (Looman & Abracen, 2010).

Operational definitions were used to understand the main constructs and concepts of the study. I formulated questions that were asked to the focus group. The questions and answers were understood and measured based on the operational definitions given. Otherwise, a study may be contradictory or misunderstood because a different definition was used to understand the focus group questions and answers. By operationally defining the main concepts, the study was based on these definitions (Babbie, 2015).

### **Methodology**

Data were collected from social workers who either work or have worked with the African American, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation. The information was gathered using a focus group. In a comparison done between different data collection methods, focus groups were identified as yielding greater disclosures that would be beneficial to the study (Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley, & McKenna, 2017).

Questions were asked to ascertain what values and skills are most lacking in African American, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation. Additionally, they helped guide the research in identifying rehabilitation methods for African American, gang-affiliated, juvenile delinquents as an alternative to punitive approaches. Further, the outcome of the focus group will help to provide a framework for social workers about their role in this rehabilitation process. This includes systemic issues and barriers that hinder the ability to fulfill social work roles. All relevant information was gathered for the accuracy of the project.

## **Participants**

Five licensed clinical social workers (LCSW) or licensed social workers (LSW) who are known to work with African American, male, gang-affiliated, juvenile delinquents were selected to participate in the study using nonprobability sampling. Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, and Rahim (2013) recommend using nonprobability sampling for qualitative analysis to deliberately select participants with features that will be pertinent to the topic. I sought to understand how social workers view their roles and abilities in helping African American, male, gang-affiliated, juvenile delinquents. Homogeneous samples that are designed to give an in-depth view of a specific issue were used when recruiting participants for the study.

Participants were recruited via e-mail. I reached out to social workers who I am familiar with who work with this population. Two of the participants were identified through my knowledge of them working with the population. Three participants were identified through the snowball method. The sample size included both male and female participants. Participant were all European American, and their ages spanned from 30-years-old to over 60-years-old.

Although I already know some of the prospective participants, I did not have any personal or professional relationship with any of them. Bias was not an issue. Creswell (2013) suggested only asking open-ended questions to limit bias in action research. By using open-ended questions, the researcher is not limiting the answers based on bias. If the researcher were to ask closed-ended questions, the respondent must choose from the choices being offered as opposed to the answer that he/she feels answers the question

best. By asking open-ended questions, the researcher's personal feelings will not influence the participants' responses (Creswell, 2013). Further, by obtaining informed consent, the participants were aware of the process and goal of the research.

### **Instruments**

The construct of the questions asked during the focus group were open-ended. Open-ended questions allow the respondent to answer freely, in their own words. Further, using open-ended questions gives the respondent the opportunity to insert their opinion into what is being asked (Zull, 2016). At the beginning of the group, a questionnaire asking about the personal demographics of each participant was dispersed. Upon completion, a guided list of open-ended questions was asked to the group. This allowed the group of social workers to share their thoughts and opinions about how to best provide rehabilitation to African American, male, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation. Questions included, "in your role as a social worker, how do you think social workers can better serve this population?" and "what impact do you think the current system of incarceration and punishment has on this population"?

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The focus group met for 2 hours during which time questions were asked. Stewart and Shamdasani (2014) provided a recommended trajectory of how the focus group session should proceed. The session began by the moderator welcoming participants after which an overview of the topic was given. I then gave basic ground rules for the group, such as reminding members about confidentiality, respect for other participants, and truthfulness. Participants were reminded that there are no wrong answers to any of the

questions and they should speak freely. This introduction was followed by the demographic questions and the focus group questions. The focus group discussion was audio recorded and later transcribed into text.

Before the focus group convening, informed consent was obtained from each participant. Informed consent requires the researcher to provide a detailed understanding of the research activities and process to the potential participant. By signing the consent form, the participant authorizes the researcher to engage him/her in the research as well as use the outcomes as delineated in the informed consent form (Grady, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

Researchers conducting qualitative research frequently use content analysis to analyze data by summarizing the information into categories based on interpretation (Elo et al., 2014; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The analysis began in the early stages of the data collection. The focus group transcript was converted into written text as suggested by Zhang and Wildemuth (2009). I recorded the focus group session and transcribed the recording into text. At the beginning of the focus group session, I asked each member to state their name together with a sentence of their choosing. This helped me in identifying their voices when transcribing the recording.

After collecting the data and transcribing the recording, themes were identified to categorize the information. By repeatedly reading through the transcript, themes began to emerge. I used hand coding to categorize the themes identified from the transcript of the focus group. I tallied up themes that the group agreed on as well as areas where there



were differing opinions. Once all the data were collected, coded, and analyzed, conclusions were drawn.

When conducting research, it is essential to ensure the data are rigorous. Roget, Roget, and Roget's Thesaurus (1999) wrote that the word "rigor" is synonymic to the words "precise, accurate, exact, scientific, and unerring." Bias and assumptions of the researcher can hinder the rigor of a project. Having active participants within the project allows the assumptions and biases of the researcher to be challenged by the other participants, therefore, maintaining reliability and rigor within the project (Padgett, 2017).

### **Ethical Procedures**

The institutional review board (IRB) approval number was 10-01-18-0655486 and will expire on September 28, 2019. Fowler (2013) discussed the importance of ethically responsible research. While conducting research, it is my duty and responsibility to uphold the ethics delineated in the NASW (2017) code of ethics. Furthermore, if the research was considered unethical, the results can be challenged in addition to possible professional and legal ramifications. There are several safeguards that help to be sure that ethical research is being conducted. Informed consent and ensuring the rights of the participants were taken into consideration.

Participants of an action research study must be given a consent form to sign before participation. Therefore, participants for this study were given one. The consent form included a definition of the study, the role of the participant, the fact that the study is voluntary and noncompensatory, and the guidelines for confidentiality. Possible ways

to ensure confidentiality was to assign pseudonyms to everyone. During the focus groups, aliases were used to refer to the participants. The master key identifying each participants' pseudonym is kept in a locked safe together with the recording and transcript of the focus group session. I am the only person with access to the safe. The data will be held for a minimum of 5 years after which they will be destroyed.

Before conducting the research project, application and approval of the IRB of the university occurred. When filling out the application for IRB approval, all procedures were included. All procedures that were outlined to the IRB to ensure ethical, procedural practice within the research study were followed.

### **Summary**

In this section of the capstone, I delineated a plan for collecting the data through focus groups. I described a plan for recruiting potential candidates and how contact was made. I included strategies for data collection and analysis of the information. Ethical concerns were addressed, including a proposal about how to properly store information for a minimum of 5 years. Upon completion of the project, this section was updated to include more information about participants, data collection, and data analysis. In the following section, I plan to present the findings of the study.

### Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of this action research study was to understand how social workers perceive their role in the rehabilitation of African American, male, juvenile delinquents who have gang affiliation. I identified the need for the study after having worked in a school with many African American, male, juvenile delinquents who have gang affiliation. Social workers may not know the role they play with this population. The purpose of action research is to collaborate with participants to study a system and cooperate to identify areas of positive change within that system (O'Brien, 2001). Thus, I used a focus group to help identify areas of possible change within the social work profession to better serve the African American, male, gang-affiliated, juvenile delinquent population.

The focus group that was assembled consisted of five social workers. Licensure of participants included LCSW, LSW, and licensed clinical alcohol and drug counselors (LCADC). Participants all either work or have worked with African American, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation. There was one research question that guided the study:

RQ: How do social workers perceive their role in the rehabilitation of African American, male, juvenile delinquents who have gang affiliation?

The focus group session was audio recorded and then transcribed into text. Hand coding was used to code and categorize the information. Emerging themes were noted and finessed to yield final themes relevant to the research question. In this section, I will discuss the methods I used to analyze the data, the demographics of the focus group

participants, and the findings of the study. I will also discuss limitations to the study and how I addressed them.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Upon gaining IRB approval, it took 10 days to recruit participants and conduct the focus group. During recruitment, eight potential participants expressed interest in joining the group. Of the eight who responded, five individuals were ultimately part of the focus group. One focus group was conducted as enough information for this project was gathered during that time. Participants consisted of a mix of social work professionals who held either an LSW or LCSW. In addition to clinical licensure, one participant also held an LCADC. Participants were also required to have worked with the juvenile delinquent population for a minimum of 3 years. The focus group session lasted for 1 hour and 20 minutes with no breaks.

At the onset of the meeting, group members were asked to sign a consent form after which a demographic questionnaire was distributed to each group member. The questionnaire helped me gain knowledge into my sample population. Included in the focus group were four females and one male spanning a wide age range.

Transcription of the focus group session was done manually and began the day after the focus group met. A foot pedal was used to aid in the transcription process. It took 1 1/2 weeks to transcribe and review the transcription to ensure accuracy. After transcribing, I immediately began sorting, filtering, coding, and categorizing the data. This process took 2 weeks and 5 days. I transferred the text into an Excel file with each sentence occupying a row in Excel. I then divided the text into separate Excel documents

based on the questions asked during the focus group. Each question was placed on a different page in red font. I placed the response each participant gave for the question on the respective page. At this point, I continued filtering the information using recommendations for qualitative data analysis for focus groups from the University of North Dakota (Educational Foundations and Research, University of North Dakota, 2016). I went through each page and asked myself if the participant answered the question that was asked. If yes, I left the comment under the appropriate question. If not, I wondered if the comment answered another question that was asked. If yes, I placed that comment on the page of that question. If not, I placed it on a separate page titled "extra information." Upon completion of filtering all of the data using this method, I perused the information in the document labeled extra information. I left the data that were relevant to the research topic and deleted all unnecessary, nonrelevant information.

After the data were sorted and filtered, I began the coding process. The entirety of the data analysis was done using a lens of DAT. I read through all the filtered data by focus group question and noticed words that seemed relevant to the topic. I documented these words in separate Excel tabs by question. Additionally, I categorized these words based on broader categories. Upon completion, all these codes were transferred to one Excel sheet and categories to another Excel tab. There were 175 original and duplicate codes and 78 original and duplicate categories noted. I further filtered the data by eliminating duplicates and collapsing categories to yield 24 categories. These categories were further filtered to ascertain five categories that related to the research question, five categories that related to the theoretical framework, and five categories that were other

findings. I then recategorized the groupings for the categories related to the theoretical framework and other findings to fit within subthemes of the categories related to the research question. This process helped to uncover themes about this research project.

During the process of data collection and data analysis, it is important for a qualitative researcher to be mindful of establishing rigor of the inquiry. Anney (2014) suggested using a reflexive journal and peer debriefing as credibility strategies in qualitative research. A reflexive journal is used to reflect on, interpret, and plan data collection. Further, the reflective journal should include the researcher's perceptions during the process (Anney, 2014). I wrote in a reflexive journal and constantly reviewed it to be sure that only information from the participants was included in the data analysis and that my thoughts and feelings were excluded.

Another way to ensure credibility in qualitative research is through peer debriefing. Peer debriefing provides the researcher with scholarly guidance during the research process (Anney, 2014). Feedback helps the researcher to improve the quality of the research. I received regular weekly or biweekly academic guidance from my chairperson using video conferencing. During that time, we spoke about my research process, data collection, data analysis, the direction of the research inquiry, and my thoughts and feelings throughout the process. Peer debriefing helped me to expand my categorical analysis and broaden the depth of my research.

A limitation that I found within the study was that all participants were European American. Although each member brought insight and experience into the group session, having a racially diverse sample group could have added to the understanding of the

challenges that minority groups face. The focus group did discuss cultural competence at length and the need for social workers to be competent regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. I addressed this concern in my reflexivity journal, and because of the rich data that were yielded from the focus group session, this limitation did not cause concerns about the findings.

### **Findings**

While working in an out of district placement, I came in contact with many youth who had been involved with the law. Many of these juveniles were gang-affiliated. There was a lack of services to this population of youth, and specifically African American males. I wondered if the reason for lack of rehabilitative methods for these youth was because social workers did not understand their roles when working with this population. The need to understand how social workers perceive their roles in the rehabilitation of African American, male, juvenile delinquents with gang-affiliation became apparent.

Findings from the study were enlightening as to how social workers understand their role in the intervention with this juvenile delinquent population that includes potential barriers to treatment, as well as unexpected findings. In the coming section, I will provide an in-depth discussion of the findings.

### **Sample Characteristics**

Sample characteristics of the group present for the focus group included four females and one male with ages varying between 25 and 70-years-old. All participants held a MSW and either an LSW or LCSW. Additionally, one participant had an LCADC. All participants either worked, or have worked, with the juvenile delinquent population

for a minimum of 3 years in various settings. Participants brought knowledge based on their experience working in settings such as intensive outpatient (IOP), drug and alcohol rehab, detention facility, private practice, outpatient facilities, schools, and court mandated therapy. All participants participated actively in the focus group discussion.

### **Themes**

Of the 78 initial categories that were later filtered down to 24 categories during the data analysis process, five reigning themes about the research question emerged. These themes were being culturally competent, giving voice to youth, fostering community, building on strengths, and increasing positive social support. Each category has supporting themes. When discussing the findings, pseudonyms will be used to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

#### **Cultural Competence**

Social workers understand their role in their rehabilitation of male, African American, juvenile delinquents who have gang-affiliation as requiring cultural competence. Included in the category cultural competence are the themes of recognizing the challenges associated with engagement, incarceration, and racism.

**Recognizing the challenges with engagement.** A theme that was discussed within the group session was challenges related to engagement. Daisy stated, “I mean the first obstacle to any of this is engaging them.” Joy understood these issues by saying “it’s important to talk about being a white male or female and looking at how that impacts your attempts to do outreach and what responsibility we have to understand better that culture.” Joy pointed out that “we are all white women,” generalizing the social work



population. Joy suggested speaking to an African American coworker to better understand how to work with the population. She stated:

I don't know if any of you work with Black social workers. Try to have a conversation. Ya know try and have an honest conversation. It's really hard. But it's really important. And I think there are so many things we don't know. That we should know. And that we need to know.

She further discussed how social workers should strive to be “constantly sensitized to the environmental realities of the suffering.” Ella shared a story relating to her work experience:

What comes to light for me is I remember when I worked as an intern in Jersey Shore's outpatient addiction unit and I actually had an African American male who was mandated by court to be there in our IOP group and I remember he looked at me and he said what would a white girl, how would you be able to understand an African American male such as myself that's coming here. What do you even know about these things? How can you even be of service to me?

Ella reflected:

I remember that question and I remember thinking about it, I totally hear what he is saying. I was still in college and still trying to build my knowledge and competency in other areas, and it took time to build that trust.

Daisy validated this comment by saying “people trust people in their own communities,” to which the group murmured sounds of agreement.

The group discussed additional challenges with reaching this population and brainstorming ways to reconcile this issue. Daisy offered, “Social media. That's really a way to reach these adolescents. Because you may not find them in school, you may not find them where they're supposed to be, but you'll always find them on social media.”

The group agreed. She elaborated on this idea by saying,

Well, going back to the whole beginning of the discussion where they're joining gangs for a sense of community and family. Creating that sense in a social media platform and bringing in, like you were saying, some major role models for them that will entice them to join these communities and giving that them that community on social media.

The group discussed other ways of engagement such as using celebrities for outreach and normalizing help-seeking. “It’s still such a stigma but, like with the *Me Too* movement, just make it about being in therapy,” said Daisy.

**Racism.** It is vital to note that much of what was discussed within the focus group session was not exclusive to the African American community. Social workers should be competent and realize that these challenges may span across youth from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. The differentiation of African American youth is reflective of the racism prevalent in the nation. Daisy affirmed this by saying:

I feel like everything that we're talking about is not specific to the Black community. It’s specific to any delinquent teenager that has a difficult environment. Be that family. Be that lifestyle. Whatever it is. Um but I do feel

that the Black community may have it harder just due to the fact of racism and stigma in the country. But it's really not specific to them.

Joy elaborated by saying:

As such its incumbent on us that with any population we work with to be constantly sensitized to the environmental realities of the suffering of whether you are talking about LGBT, whether you are talking about black, whether you are talking about Asian. I mean this is a crazy world. I don't think we can afford to not remember that. I don't think it can resonate as truth when you are talking to someone who is different if you don't have that in your system; in your operating system.

When researching this population, it is important to note the characteristics that contribute to the high-risk nature of these youth. Joy shed light on this by saying "particularly you know because we are talking about African Americans you are talking about a whole system in this country of like serious racism that puts African American youth at incredibly high risk, particularly males."

When discussing programs and resources to help with this population, Katherine shared:

There are definitely some programs out there but again I'm sure that the resources are limited for them and as Joy was saying because of the racism in this country it is probably even more limited for an African American population than others would be.

She also pointed out that fear can be a potential barrier for treatment as well by saying, “I think because of racism in this country reaching out for help if you are an African American person or whatever race it is there’s probably some fear involved.” When discussing policies, Joy pointed out that:

Decriminalization and legalization of marijuana is a really important change that will certainly allow any number of people A: not to be picked up and B: to be released for low-level marijuana charges. That will affect the African American population significantly.

The discussion continued to discuss disproportionate minority contact within the justice system. Joy added:

I’m really not sure what the population is of drug court. Somehow, I have a sense but nothing to back it up, that it’s really skewed for white opiate users as opposed to heroin users or other kinds of drugs that are more frequently used by Black juveniles or Black men.

Resounding agreement was heard from other group members. Katherine elaborated on this point related to policies by saying:

I think it needs to start with everyone being treated fairly in the system. If that were to happen then maybe some level of trust would be gained. So that’s not necessarily a policy because those policies are necessarily in place already. I mean we’re all created equal and have certain rights and all that but it doesn’t work like that in this country, and I think that’s a huge part of the problem. So

again, if people really followed and abide by you know the bill of rights then trust I think would happen more readily.

**Challenges associated with incarceration.** As social workers, it is important to recognize the challenges associated with incarceration, and the nature of youth wanting to fit in. This desire to fit in can lead to joining gang involvement while incarcerated. Daisy shared:

I can think of two instances where I worked with people were incarcerated for drug offenses, who joined gang affiliation while they were in prison for safety measures. And came out, they got the tattoos on their neck and so now they became gang-affiliated, and before incarceration, they weren't.

Daisy further went on to state about incarceration, “so that kind of had a negative effect.”

Katherine elaborated:

I think for youth who are incarcerated for those status offenses, lot of times they are probably being introduced to a culture that they didn't know about. And they want to fit in, and they gravitate towards that kind of lifestyle. I stopped reviewing here due to time constraints. Please go through the rest of your section and look for the patterns I pointed out to you. I will now look at Section 4.

### **Giving Voice to Youth**

Social workers understand the need to help this juvenile delinquent population gain a voice. Social workers can help youth feel safe using their voice by fostering the formation of trusting relationships and offering opportunities to help these youth feel success.

**Interpersonal relationships.** Social workers can help youth form and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. A theme that was largely discussed during the focus group session was interpersonal skills. Christian recognized that many of these youth communicate using urban slang. He realized that this characteristic might pose an interpersonal barrier. He said:

I'm just thinking of the gang population. There tends to be urban slang in those types of environments. So, for example, I worked with one individual and just the way he speaks, I have had to in the sessions tell him no cursing to just to try to almost like condition him to be a better speaker because when he comes in, he still sounds unprofessional and is cursing a lot.

Christian was further concerned that there may be traits and interpersonal skills that hinder these youth from eventually attaining an honest job. He stated that when working with this population perhaps social workers should focus on "...interpersonal skills just like basic like speech and like professionalism and professional skills would be just like helpful because...maybe in these communities you're not getting those skills." Helping these youth to speak in a more refined manner may help them communicate with, and better relate to members both in and out of their communities.

Daisy offered an idea to preempt the issue of stigma and lack of interpersonal skills by intervening with the youth at a young age. She proposed having some sort of program that can utilize social workers to have positive interactions with the youth and encourage them to gain positive interpersonal skills. Daisy offered a suggestion to social workers:

Incorporate different artistic and talented skills like singing, dancing, art or all different kinds of things like that and have each student have to take say two extra-curricular activities per semester, and they can choose and through that instead of it being something academic it's more something therapeutic and we're actually reaching them before anything happens.

Daisy further asserted that this could help reduce the stigma of working with a social worker. Daisy also discussed how this sort of program could be beneficial to the youth in other ways. She stated, "at the same time you're building on their strengths. And at the same time, you're giving them that choice of what do you want to do." Christian recognized that for the gang-affiliated juvenile delinquent population, school-based programs would likely not be effective. He suggested bringing an athlete into the community:

I would imagine that if let's just say like Lebron James. If he goes into a community and he brings certain people in to just maybe do any task or something. I feel like those are positive interactions that can make a ton of change even like interpersonally.

He discussed perhaps social workers could recruit different athletes to work with youth within an organizational structure to help them interpersonally. Group members agreed that these youth admire athletes and may be receptive to connecting with them as a gateway to learning interpersonal skills.

**Facilitate skill building.** Social workers can also facilitate skill building to help these youth feel successful, heard, and safe. Daisy shared the importance of helping youth

feel successful in school by saying, “well making them feel successful in school is so important. So important to their development, because that’s someplace that should be a safe place for them.” Perhaps if the youth felt safe and secure in school, the need to seek out that feeling of security elsewhere may not arise. Daisy also pointed out the importance of schools providing positive role models for the youth. She said about the school system, “someplace that the adults there should be a role model for them. So, giving them a voice in the school of being able to say I need to feel successful.” She further created the link between academic success and overall school performance:

There are child study teams that are studying all about the developmental needs and all of the different needs that they have, but how about looking more at their success rate academically and helping them feel successful that they are going to want to learn and want to stay in school.

Joy chimed in saying “they call it the school to prison pipeline so with that in mind well it certainly explains a lot of what we are seeing.” If for some reason youth are not feeling successful in school, they may not feel safe and motivated to remain in school.

Joy pointed out that the teachers who are educating in the urban schools may not have the experience necessary to deal with youth from these environments. “In schools, they send the novice teachers into the most needy schools. And because everybody wants to get out and when they have some seniority that's what they do. So that the youngest teachers burn out quickly.” Having a constant turnover rate of teachers may contribute to a general feeling of lack of safety and security for the youth.

Ella contributed to the conversation with another perspective:



I was just thinking of self-respect. The mindset for many is very victimized versus that I could really make it, that I could really do. I've heard this several times from African American clients that I work with like, hello, do you even know my background? You know who my grandma was, my grandpa was? Like why would I be successful? I had a brother that OD'd. I had a dad that's a drug addict. I'm just like thinking of random people that I know. I'm not generalizing the population. That there's like a mindset of lack of abundance.

Group members agreed. Daisy said, "a feeling of despair," referring to the feeling that youth of this population may have that they cannot be successful or have a voice because of their backgrounds.

### **Fostering Community**

In this category, social workers can help enhance environments to foster a sense of community and positivity. Additionally, participants discussed the impact of the environment on gang behavior.

**Environmental influence on gang behavior.** It is important to recognize the environments that youth come from and its influence on gang behavior. Joy brought across the powerful point:

Gangs are just families. And Adolescents need guidance from somewhere, and if they are not kind of getting it in a home environment or if they are not getting cared for in school, I think they are going to look for alternative families and direction.

If we view gangs in the way that they are just families, and youth need the familial structure, perhaps social workers can help these youth gain that sense of family in a positive way.

Christian created the link between gang-affiliation and drug involvement:

Because I have the addiction background, it's like immediately when I am thinking adolescents, I am going the addiction route and then I just created the link when we are talking gang affiliations, the extraneous variable with gangs is drugs. So, it's like addressing the drug culture of adolescents.

Other group members agreed with the point that gangs and urban communities, in general, tend to have an influx of drug involvement. Christian further asserted:

When you think about it, in those African American populations like if you are looking at it, a lot of the urban areas tend to encompass a lot of that population and in those urban areas there can be a lack of resources which makes that family dynamic and selling drugs and making money more desirable because the environment isn't validating the things that they need.

Environmental factors may be largely contributing to the gang and drug behavior of these youth. Christian drove home the point by continuing:

Where is the largest percentage of the gang populations? In those urban areas.

Right? And those urban areas are the areas that tend to have the most recidivism and arrests, and the large majority of the population in those areas are African Americans. So, it's almost that's where I'm just going back to the environmental

components. If you drop anyone in a place where there's a lot of um anger and not a lot of jobs and not a lot of resources. That person's going to struggle.

Christian further went on to discuss the difficulty of getting out of the ghetto. He stated, "the only way to make money and provide for your family is like selling drugs or doing something illegal." Christian suggested, "start outside and then build inside." By putting resources into those communities and creating more opportunities, it will "eventually affect human behavior."

**Improving environmental conditions.** Many of the environments these youth are growing up in yield negative peer influences and gangs. Because youth are impressionable, social workers have a role in improving environmental conditions to promote positivity and community. Christian shared how this was implemented in an urban area of Philadelphia. "What they did to the communities, those same type of communities that are talking about here is they implemented programs on the environmental aspect." Christian shared about a program that he interned at that targeted the concept on intervening through an environmental approach:

For example, the mural arts program in Philadelphia. Where they had the community go to impoverished areas and buildings that were dilapidated and everything and they painted on it, and they planted trees, and they made the environment more welcoming and just kind of built the community around that.

This program served to bring light, positivity, and beautification to an otherwise dilapidated area. Christian further went on to discuss the impact of the esthetics of the environment on human behavior:

I'm thinking a lot that the environment dictates a lot of human behavior, so it's almost like if we are able to almost change their environment to make that sense of community and belonging, then it could have effects on just interpersonally and everything.

He continued, deriving inspiration from his time in Philadelphia:

Yeah because what happened in Philadelphia that was huge, and some of the murals in Philadelphia are absolutely gorgeous, and they are all over the place, and it's the same goal in mind is just to try to make the community brighter and more welcoming because it helps bring positivity.

Joy added, “that is a wonderful program. They also have prisoners coming out and working in the gardens in Philadelphia.” This sparked a conversation amongst group members about the benefits of having beautification programs to help create more positive environments.

Katherine brought up a great point about using these beautification programs to engage with community members:

I think that the idea that the people are building up their own communities and creating a new sense of community with each other doing this positive thing is a therapeutic tactic or technique, however you want to call it, and maybe by engaging by programs you are opening up lines of communication to get people more apt to get into treatment or get or get into therapy to try to make some lifestyle changes.

The issue of funding and resources for a neighborhood beautification remained. Christian presented a possible funding source:

Don't hold me to the number but I know that drug court as an alternative saves the state a decent amount of money because you are not incarcerating the individual.

So, what happens if a policy could be all the money that's saved by not incarcerating these individuals, that money could be filtered back into those environments and then implement those type of programs, so it's almost like use the benefits of drug court financially and filter it back into the communities.

Group members murmured their approval of this idea. Ella contributed by saying “And I’m gonna add to that is that I love the art idea.” She pointed out that, “it’s a very artsy culture. Whether it’s music, dance, it’s very much part of their culture.” She suggested using some of the funding to incorporate the arts as a way to reach and intervene with this youth population. “I love that idea of putting the money back and then using it in such a type of a way.”

### **Building on Strengths**

Social workers can use their unique perspectives to build on the strengths of youth who are gang-affiliated.

By building on the youth’s strengths, the social worker can help boost the individual's self-esteem. A recurring theme that was discussed during the focus group session was self-esteem and strengths. It was unanimously agreed upon that social workers should seek to uncover these youths’ strengths and help them to succeed in utilizing these strengths. By doing so, this will help boost the youth's self-esteem as well.

Ella shared, "when I work with adolescents, we try to figure out what their strengths are and what they're good at." She elaborated by saying:

If there's a young man or girl that walks in and they tell me they love to dance, so we implement that in whatever we do we add dance. Or if they love singing, we add singing. And if they love movement, we'll try to do some yoga poses together.

Ella shared that in addition to helping with their self-esteem, engaging them using their strengths, "makes them want to participate."

### **Increasing Positive Social Support**

Participants recognized the need to be a role model, and also foster a positive support system for the youth.

**Role model.** Social workers can serve as a positive role model for the youth as well as facilitate the inclusion of positive role models into the youth's life. The importance of youth having a positive role model in their life was discussed often. The lack of familial structure within these communities is a glaring issue. Joy conceptualized the gang affiliation as, "gangs are just families." If these youth are not receiving the stability from a family unit, they will seek it out elsewhere. Joy affirmed this by saying:

Adolescents need guidance from somewhere and if they are not kind of getting it in a home environment or if they are not getting cared for in school, I think they are going to look for alternative families and direction.

Gangs are providing this "alternative family" to the youth. Daisy stated that gangs give these youth, "a sense of community and belonging." And while Ella shared that, "it

becomes their support system,” Daisy pointed out about this negative support system that social workers should “combat it with a positive support system.”

**Support system.** Social workers can engage family and positive community members into assuming the role of a positive support system for these youth. Because youth are impressionable, having these role models and this support system is essential for their growth. Daisy suggested enlisting the police force to help create this positive support system for these youth. She shared, “there are in certain cities where they have these youth after-school programs where they can come and kind of practice being junior police.” The group discussed the benefits to have law enforcement do outreach in communities. Daisy suggested facilitating a youth program within law enforcement where the youth “can see the action and adrenaline rush they are seeking in a positive way, and they can find family that way.” Perhaps by seeing that they can gain that sense of community, family, and success in a positive way would be beneficial to these youth. When discussing this concept of law enforcement and gang-affiliated youth interfacing in this constructive way, Daisy powerfully stated, “a police force is the largest gang you can join.”

### **Unexpected Findings**

Data collection yielded many themes both expected and unexpected. Of the unexpected findings, everything that was discussed can be used to reflect delinquent youth of any race or gender. This is helpful to note as information garnered from this research study can be beneficial to social workers interacting with African American youth as well as youth of other racial backgrounds. Another unexpected finding was the

workforce issues that affect helpers of the population. For example, the idea that novice police officers and teachers were sent into the urban communities due to the quick burnout rate. Additionally, the low salaries of social workers which prevent them from working in these areas instead seeking employment in areas that offer larger salaries.

Though the issue of engagement was not an unexpected finding, the solutions presented and discussed were unexpected. Using social media, celebrities, and the arts to engage these youth were all points that were not previously considered.

### **Summary**

Findings of the study were consistent with understanding how social workers understand their role in their rehabilitation of African American juvenile delinquents with gang-affiliation. Social workers understand their role as being culturally competent which includes recognizing challenges with engagement, and incarceration. Also, it is important to mention that cultural competence included recognizing that the challenges discussed may not be unique to the African American population. The differentiation of this population reflects the racism in this country.

Findings also supported the fact that social workers understand their role as giving voice to youth. By facilitating relationship building, interpersonal skills building, and helping these youth to feel safe, and successful, social workers can help empower these youth to use their voice for good. Some practical suggestions to accomplish this included helping these youth gain professional skills, and incorporating social work driven programs into the education system. It was also concluded that social workers understand their responsibility for this population as enhancing the environments and environmental



conditions to foster a sense of community. Before being able to accomplish this, it is important for social workers to recognize the impact the environment has on youth and gang behavior.

Another important point noted by the focus group is the importance of social workers to take responsibility for focusing on and building on the strengths of these youth. Utilizing the ingrained strengths of the youth can help build self-esteem, positivity, and trust.

Increasing positive social support was the final finding of the focus group. Social workers understand their role in the rehabilitation of African American juvenile delinquents with gang-affiliation as fostering positive social support. By either being a positive role model for the youth or facilitating the building of these interactions and relationships, social workers understand the importance of these positive social supports.

Strategies related to each of these findings were discussed in depth in the preceding section. These findings and strategies will help social workers intervene more effectively with African American juvenile delinquents who have gang-affiliation. In Section 4, I will discuss how the findings of the study relate to professional practice and can contribute to social change.

#### Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of the study was to understand social workers' roles in the rehabilitation of African American, juvenile delinquents who have gang affiliation. The study was qualitative and was conducted using action research. I used a focus group to gather the data. Using focus groups as a means for data collection is unique because information is generated by the interaction of group members (Finch, Lewis, & Turley, 2014). As participants share information and listen to others, they reflect on what is being said to refine their viewpoints. The conversation can move to a deeper and more profound level (Finch et al., 2014). Participants were included in the focus group based on their experiences having worked with the population. Although the group was assembled using nonprobability sampling, it was heterogenous based on the diverse ages and gender of participants.

The study was conducted to better understand how social workers view their roles and responsibilities in the rehabilitation of African American, juvenile delinquents who have gang affiliation. By better understanding this population, recommendations can be made on best practice when intervening with this youth population.

Findings of the study included social workers being culturally competent, helping to give youth a voice, working to foster community, building on the strengths of the youth, and increasing positive social support. Within these categories, the participants shared practical solutions on how to accomplish this. Participants shared integral information on the importance of being competent when working with this, and other, populations. They enlightened me on the struggles that these youth face, the lack of

opportunities their neighborhoods present, the untapped strengths that they have, and the importance of bringing positivity into the neighborhoods and these youths' lives to counteract the negativity they face daily. These findings can inform social work practice by providing an understanding of social workers' perceptions regarding challenges these youth face, the importance of having social workers involved in these communities, and suggestions for how to engage and connect with them.

Findings can contribute to social work knowledge by enlightening social workers as to their roles and responsibilities in the rehabilitation of African American, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation. In addition to noting the importance of social workers taking a role and responsibility in the rehabilitation of this youth offender population, the study contributes to social work knowledge by discussing challenges and suggestions related to engagement and intervening with this population. Increasing awareness about the role social workers can play with this population may provide social workers with more clarity about what they can do to help these youth.

Social ecology can often limit a person's ability to access resources. Service provisions were linked to a reduction in risk outcomes (Li, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015). Further, it is important to realize the role DAT plays on the behavior of these youth. Growing up in crime ridden environments and associating with peers who are involved in criminal activity can negatively affect the youth. By recognizing this correlative link, social workers may notice the importance of providing services to members of this population to positively impact their lives. In this project, I sought to help social workers

understand the vitality of their work with this population. Also, suggestions for engagement and improving social conditions were made.

### **Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice**

The NASW (2017) code of ethics values of service, social justice, importance of human relationships, and competence all relate to the social work practice problem. The NASW (2017) described the value of service as “social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems” (p. #6). Included in this, is volunteering some of their time pro bono. Most of these youth are living in urban areas and struggle financially (Lloyd-Jones & Rakodi, 2014). One of the group members pointed out the lack of financial opportunities for members of these communities. By volunteering some of their time to work with this population, social workers are upholding the integral social work value of service.

The ethical principles of social justice and competence guide clinical social work practice when intervening with this population because of the racism that these youth face. It is essential for social workers to gain cultural competence and seek to understand the challenges of this minority population. Further, because of racism, African American, male youth are treated differently within the juvenile justice system (Cochran & Mears, 2014; Fader et al., 2014). Social workers should strive to uphold the NASW (2017) code of ethics values of competence and social justice by educating themselves, advocating, and fostering social change for members of this population.

The theoretical framework of DAT that was used to guide this research project directly correlated to the code of ethics' value of importance of human relationships.

DAT discusses the importance of social associations and relationships (Akers & Seller, 2004). Deviance can come from negative peer influences. Social workers intervening with this population should recognize the importance of fostering positive human relationships as outlined in the NASW (2017) code of ethics. Social workers recognize the importance of these interpersonal relationships as a vehicle for change (NASW, 2017). Social workers should seek to promote these interpersonal relationships, provide positive support, and help individuals gain the skills to maintain these constructive relationships. By promoting and fostering these relationships, social workers will be helping these youth enhance their wellbeing.

By understanding the values and principles delineated in the NASW (2017) code of ethics as they relate to working with gang-affiliated, African American, male, juvenile delinquents, social workers can gain clarity into their responsibilities with the rehabilitation of this population.

### **Recommendations for Social Work Practice**

Several action steps were discussed during the focus group session on practice, research, and policy levels. The first action step would be to advocate for policy change. Approximately \$3,597 dollars are saved per participant by using drug court (Carey & Finigan, 2004). Taking those savings and using them for programs in urban communities can help positively change these environments. The money can be used for community beautification programs and cost-free, strengths-based programs to help the youth feel successful. The environment can impact the trajectory of a youth's life (Lloyd-Jones &

Rakodi, 2014). Thus, using those funds to promote positivity in these environments can make an impact on this population on a much broader scale.

Another action step that was discussed was advocating to keep more senior staff in urban communities. Group members were concerned about the high turnover rate of police officers, teachers, and social workers in urban communities. The constant change in helping adults can lend itself to instability in the youths' lives. Perhaps by giving these helping professionals more support, education, and incentives they would stay in these communities for a longer time and help create meaningful relationships with the youth.

Creating a connection with these youth can be a challenge for many social workers. The group discussed an action step related to engagement and connecting. Social workers who work with this population should turn to the arts to find inspiration in therapy. It was recommended that social workers become creative by incorporating inspired activities into practice. Social workers should try to find out what the client excels at or has an interest in and connect with the youth in that way. Using music, dance, yoga, and other forms of creative arts can help to connect and intervene with the youth.

Using DAT to understand the negative behavior of these youth can help social workers to recognize the importance of connecting and being a positive influence in the youth's life. Creating programs that support positivity, interpersonal connection, and growth may outweigh the negative influences as understood by DAT and help these youth resist a life of crime.

As a practitioner, these findings will impact my work by using what I learned through the research project in practice. I will use the arts to connect with clients. I will

seek out pro bono work to help beautify urban neighborhoods. I hope to advocate for policies to use funds saved from drug court in the urban communities. I will also seek to become more competent and recognize the challenges these youth face because of racism. Also, I hope to be able to educate other social workers and future social workers on the importance of intervening with and advocating for members of this population.

The findings of this study may be transferred to social workers who intervene with juveniles of any race and gender. As was pointed out during the focus group, what was discussed is not exclusive to African American male youth; the point that must be considered when dealing with African American males is racism. Because of racism, the challenges are exacerbated. However, the findings and recommendations may be applicable to the overall juvenile population. Thus, this study will be useful to the broader field of social work practice.

Knowledge, recommendations, and intervention suggestions can be useful for social workers working with juveniles of any race and gender. However, a limitation of the transferability of the findings is the narrow scope of engagement and policies. It is unknown if the challenges of engagement are the same for juveniles of other demographics. Further, policies about putting the money saved from drug court back into urban communities are also specific to those run-down neighborhoods. Readers must discern individually as to the appropriateness of the findings for their population.

Recommendations for further research into engagement of juveniles of other races and genders can help to address the limitations of this study. Additionally, more research into how social workers can help youth resist joining gangs would be beneficial to this

population as well as contributing to social work knowledge. Another recommendation would be to focus on different intervention strategies when intervening with this youth population. Although there is much research on the issue of racism within the juvenile justice system, there is still a need for research on practical solutions when working with this population. Although many of the findings are consistent with DAT, resiliency theory can also have a role in understanding the behavior of these youth and how to best intervene with this population. Supplementary research could address how resiliency theory can be used to understand the findings of this study. Understanding how social workers can assist these youth to develop resilience skills through interventions suggested by participants could provide additional data.

Disseminating the findings of action research is a step toward fostering change (Wilson, Petticrew, Calnan, & Nazareth, 2010). Findings can be disseminated by being published in social work journals or online resources. Another way to disseminate findings is by posting on social media platforms. Because my project has implications for the juvenile justice system, I can disseminate the information by mailing the findings to local congressmen and women and the governor.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Findings from the research have a potential impact for positive social change on micro, mezzo, macro, practice, and policy levels. On the micro level, social workers who work with African American, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation can use creative strategies in their practice to gain rapport with their clients. Using the tools learned from



this project such as yoga, movement, art, dance, music, and other creative exercises, social workers can connect and gain trust with clients.

On the mezzo level, social workers can be used in the educational system to facilitate extracurricular activities. Social workers can integrate team building exercises, skills training, and interpersonal relationship building into the recreational activities to teach youth these integral skills.

This research project can be used to advocate for policies on a federal level. Policies that put additional resources into urban communities, rehabilitation instead of incarceration, and a fair juvenile justice system for youth regardless of racial background can impact this population on the macro level. During the Obama administration, movement toward a rehabilitative direction was encouraged. Examples of this positive direction are policies such as the Youth Opportunity AmeriCorps grants that provided funding to involve at-risk and formerly incarcerated youth in national service projects, and the liaison between the Department of Labor and the Department of Defense's National Guard Youth Challenge program providing court-involved youth with work-experience, mentors, and vocational skills to help with successful entry into the workforce (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). Advocating for increased funding for these programs can help to expand opportunities for justice-involved youth.

As one of the participants said, "we must start on the outside and work our way in." It is important to affect change on the macro level by creating and supporting policies that benefit this population.

## Summary

Many people are affected by gang violence and juvenile delinquency.

Communities live in fear of juvenile crime, and parents worry about their children joining gangs. The juvenile justice system of punishment creates career criminals out of these youth. When speaking to colleagues, it was apparent that many social workers were unaware of their role when it comes to African American, male, juvenile delinquents with gang affiliation. Several of these social workers understood that the justice system was handling these youth as they see fit. However, the justice system may not be addressing some foundational issues that can be causing the youth to join a gang and become delinquent.

The purpose of this research was to understand how social workers perceive their role in the rehabilitation of this population. Through the research, it became clear that there are many ways for social workers to help these youth. Many of these youth are just seeking to be accepted, to have a support network, or to be loved. Often, these youth do not have positive role models to teach them right from wrong. It is important for social workers to recognize that this population needs them to advocate for them, to create change, to be a positive support network, and to care.

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## Appendix: Guided Interview Questions for Focus Group

### Understanding Rehabilitation Options for Gang-Affiliated Male African American Juvenile Delinquents

1. Please state your name.
2. What are/were your responsibilities as a social worker when working with the juvenile delinquent population?
3. What was/is the most challenging part of working with this population? Why was it challenging?
4. What impact do you think the current system of incarceration and punishment has on this population?
5. In your role as a social worker, how do you think social workers can better serve this population?
6. What changes in policy do you think are necessary to better serve this population?
7. What do you think social workers can do to foster positive interpersonal skills among members of this population?
8. How do you think social workers can help youth maintain positive peer relationships?
9. Please share anything else you feel is important to add.