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Experiences of Ex-Offenders Assigned to a Work Release Program

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

Experiences of Ex-Offenders Assigned to a Work Release Program

by

Julia Marie Cottrell LeFevre

MA, Central Michigan University, 1989

BS, George Mason University, 1985

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Walden University

August 2019

Abstract

Ex-offenders face many challenges and barriers in obtaining sustainable employment when reentering society. Researchers have demonstrated that participation in a work release program prior to release from prison may be beneficial. However, not all work release reentry programs are alike. Because offenders are the benefactors of these programs, it is essential their experiences are captured. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe unique experiences of male ex-offenders previously assigned to a work release program in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory framed the study. This study gives voice to and provides an understanding of the experiences of 5 individuals recruited utilizing the snowball method who were seeking employment while in the work release program. Data was analyzed using Moustakas' 7-step data analysis procedure. Findings may inform program and policy makers of the importance to provide a more robust work release program that includes job readiness support and resources and the need to establish a partnership with local employers. Four themes emerged including: (a) Lack of Resources, (b) Need for Outside Support System, (c) Perception of Lack of Empathy from Correctional Officers and Employers, and (d) Gratitude and Appreciation to Participate in the Work Release Program. Findings further support the importance of collaboration between the criminal justice system, transitional reentry programs and employers in order to achieve positive social change with successful outcomes. These findings may lead to a reinvestment of resources and restructuring of reentry programs to serve its beneficiaries.

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Dedication

I dedicate this to, and give thanks and glory to God for, His goodness and faithfulness to me during this long journey. I also dedicate this to those I have termed *Jewels Gems* – individuals who may seem to be a little rough around the edges, but with a little polishing, love and encouragement, they will shine brilliantly like beautiful gems.

I am hopeful to put this degree to use for God's will and be a shining example to inspire others to greatness by imparting "gems" of wisdom to help them uncover their true brilliance and all that they are meant to be. I thank everyone who supported me by being a gem to me as well as I worked towards my dream of obtaining my Ph.D. in Human Services.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Ex-offenders face many challenges after incarceration. A crucial component for community reentry after incarceration is securing livable employment (Visher, Debus-Sherrill, & Yahner, 2011).While finding employment can be difficult for anyone, it is especially challenging for an individual either convicted of a felony or imprisoned for a crime committed (Burt, 2014; Flatt & Jacobs, 2018; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011; Routh & Hamilton, 2015).

Current and former Presidents' of the United States have voiced support for successful reentry programs for incarcerated individuals. In a speech discussing rehabilitation and reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals, President Barack Obama stated: "…the ultimate goal is to make sure folks are law-abiding self-sufficient citizens" (White House, 2015a). Likewise, President Donald Trump has also stated: "Our whole nation benefits if former inmates are able to reenter society as productive law-abiding citizens" (White House, 2018a).

Individuals who are employed are busier, more likely to associate with law abiding citizens, and as a result may be less likely to engage in further criminal behavior (Rukus, Eassey & Baldwin, 2016). I sought to learn the actual lived experiences of offenders seeking employment while participating in a work release program by conducting a qualitative research study. The knowledge gained by this study may help inform program officials and policy makers in developing or modifying existing programs to ensure a successful reentry.

In Chapter 1, I provide background information about challenges ex-offenders experience when seeking employment after incarceration and their lived experiences while participating in a work release program prior to release. I also present the problem statement, the purpose and nature of my study and rationale for the study design chosen. In addition, Chapter 1 contains the theoretical framework that guided the research questions that were asked of participants. I also addressed key definitions, my study's assumptions, scope and delimitations. It also included limitations and research bias. Finally, Chapter 1 provides a summary and discusses the significance of the study to include potential positive social contributions to society.

Background

Having the stigma of being a felon negatively affects employability (Jung, 2015; Schmitt & Warner, 2011). The results of a study titled "Ex-offenders and the Labor Market," conducted by Schmitt and Warner and released by the Center for Economic and Policy Research found approximately 60% of employers said they would not hire an individual with a conviction (Schmitt &Warner, 2011). This rate increased for employers with jobs that required handling money or dealing directly with customers (Prison Legal News, [PLN], 2011). Adding to this difficulty is the fact that many former offenders tend to be less educated (Jung, 2015; PLN, 2011; Rukus et al., 2016). As such, employment opportunities are limited for those who are undereducated or under-qualified (Rukus et al., 2016). Furthermore, many industries likely to hire formerly incarcerated individuals are those seeking temporary workers (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018).

Many offenders also face personal challenges making reentry difficult (Rukus et al., 2016). Researchers have a term, *criminogenic needs,* which describes risk factors such as anti-social, risk-taking and impulsivity tendencies that may heighten an individuals' predilection to engage in criminal activity (Valentine & Redcross, 2015). In their extensive research, Rukus et al. (2016) found evidence that mental health or substance abuse issues were additional barriers in securing employment. Whether these tendencies may or may not have an effect on being hired, it is possible that criminogenic needs may have a negative effect on remaining employed.

Stigmas related to incarceration further impact ex-offenders search for employment. Some employers are hesitant to hire an ex-offender because they do not want to assume the risk (Jung, 2015). Furthermore, some ex-offenders have lost job skills and cannot hold certain positions due to their incarceration (Jung, 2015). Prior to arrest, research has found that those who engage in illegal substance use have typically been jobless and some homeless (Sabet, Talpins, Dunagan, & Holmes, 2013). After release from incarceration, many of these individuals are also laden with a stigma when trying to obtain employment (Cerda, Stenstrom, & Curtis, 2015; Yadoo, 2016). Further, a history of criminal behavior and arrests reduce employment opportunities (Rukus et al., 2016; Yadoo, 2016). Similarly, authors Schmitt and Warner (2011) found that a prior conviction not only places a stigma on individuals, it also presents additional restrictions on employment opportunities. This stigma, coupled in some cases, with substance abuse or mental health issues, presents even more challenges in obtaining employment.

Latessa (2012) suggested reentry programs that do not focus on criminogenic needs, in addition to assisting the inmate in becoming gainfully employed before release, run the risk of being ineffective. There are many articles and studies that have been conducted on a variety of reentry programs for offenders prior to release (Abrams, Terry & Franke, 2011; Cohen, 2017; Day, Hardcastle & Birgden, 2012; Duwe, 2015; Jeffery & Woolpert, 1974; Jung, 2014; Marion, 2002; Rudes, Lerch & Taxman, 2011; Rukus et al., 2016).

In my research, I found previous studies of transitional programs were either evaluative, focused on recidivism, or were focused primarily on quantitative results of the ex-offender challenges. I located several studies that focused on challenges offenders faced in obtaining employment. I also found a few qualitative studies with a narrow focus. For example, one study I found focused specifically on drug-offenders participating in a faith-based program (Lurigio et al., 2015). Since many offenders return to their local community, reentry programs conducted in jails versus prisons may be more beneficial to the individual (Cohen, 2017; Lurigio, Miller, Miller, &Barnes, 2015). Unfortunately, some programs face budget challenges making it difficult to have a robust reentry program (Cohen, 2017; Lurigio et al., 2015).

As such, I conducted a qualitative study of former work release participants in a local program. I wanted to ascertain the lived experiences of ex-offenders seeking employment while participating in a reentry program. I also sought to better understand their employment sustainability after release. That is, whether or not they gained, and then maintained the employment gained in the work release program or not upon release.

In order to do this, I conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions

Problem Statement

The majority of ex-offenders experience unsuccessful attempts at obtaining life-sustaining employment (Aldhous, 2015; Brown, 2011; Burt, 2014; Cantora, 2015;Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011;Harley & Feist-Price, 2014; Kubrin & Stewart, 2006; Laird, 2013; Lurigioet al., 2015;Myrick, 2013; Paul-Emile, 2014; Varghese, Hardin, Bauer, & Morgan, 2010). Ex-offenders can face work, family, and social factors such as mental illness and addiction challenges upon release; however, if employed, the risk of re-offending is greatly reduced (Brown, 2011; Burt, 2014; Fox, 2012; Harley & Feist-Price, 2014; Nally, Lockwood, Ho, & Knutson, 2014; White House, 2015b). Recidivism is the result of a former offender repeating a criminal behavior resulting in their re-arrest after they have experienced negative consequences of the same or a previous criminal behavior such as arrest, conviction, and subsequently imprisonment (National Institute of Justice [NIJ], 2014). In addition to challenges in obtaining employment, Burt (2014) pointed to numerous collateral consequences of being denied access to public benefits for offenders with a drug-related charge.

With an increase in the prison population and recidivism rates, a focus on transitioning ex-offenders into the community is critical (Cheliotis, 2008; Duwe & Clark, 2014; Rukus et al., 2016; White House, 2015b; White House, 2018b). Temporary work release programs allow inmates to return to the community for a short time period near the end of their sentence (Cheliotis, 2008; Duwe, 2015; Duwe & Clark, 2014; Rukus et

al., 2016). The goal of these programs is not only to reduce prison overcrowding but also to assist the inmate in securing livable employment prior to release from prison (Cheliotis, 2008; Duwe, 2015; Duwe & Clark, 2014; Rukus et al., 2016). Additionally, participation in a temporary release program allows the individuals to establish a savings account providing them with the ability to pay personal financial obligations they may owe (Cheliotis, 2008; Duwe, 2015). Furthermore, not only is prison overcrowding reduced, the potential to save tax payers dollars is realized in the long run (White House, 2018b).

The inmate population for jails in counties and cities across the United States has increased by approximately 1% per year since 2000 (Minton & Zeng, 2015). By the end of 2015, the total incarcerated population decreased 2.3% (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). However, there were still an estimated 2,136,600 confined inmates at year end 2015 (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). Additionally, another 4,564,900 individuals were supervised in the community by the U.S. adult correctional system (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016). This large number makes a strong case for having beneficial transitional programs available for inmates.

According to a news article, in 2014, a local correctional facility was at 150% overcapacity. As a result, there was an urgent need for a 200-bed expansion. There was fear that with budget shortfalls, not only would it be difficult to expand, it was also anticipated that three jail facilities would close by the end of 2016. However, in 2017 a $39 million contract was awarded to expand the facility. Construction began in December 2017 with occupancy scheduled for 2020.

According to a county annual report, in May 2018 the average daily population at the Adult Detention Center (ADC) was 1,052 inmates which is a 58% larger inmate population than the state-rated capacity. In order to handle the overcapacity, they are using a double bunking strategy.

As more and more state officials need to reduce budgets and look for alternatives to jails, it is imperative that effective programs are available to assist in reducing the number of jail beds needed while providing inmates with resources to obtain sustainable employment. Furthermore, in fiscal year 2015, under the Comprehensive Community Corrections Act, the work release program alternative was only utilized 0.2% (Virginia Criminal Sentencing Commission, 2015). According to the annual budget report for fiscal year 2018, the average daily population of the ADC Work Release Program was 61 inmates. This suggests there is opportunity to expand the work release reentry program.

According to documentation provided by the program, the purpose of the Work Release Program is to allow inmates to either continue employment held prior to incarceration or obtain new employment if unemployed. Furthermore, participation in this work release program gives inmates the opportunity to pay various court fines, financial obligations, and support family where necessary. Additionally, the program seeks to help work release program participants grow a savings account so that when they are released they are in a more stable financial position to be able to transition back into society. Finally, another benefit of participating in the ADC work release program is that it provides life skill classes and requires mandatory attendance in programs such as

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) programs for those with substance abuse issues.

A variety of studies have been conducted on work release, transitional, or other community based correctional programs (Abrams, Terry & Franke, 2011; Day, Hardcastle & Birgden, 2012; Jeffery & Woolpert, 1974; Jung, 2014; Marion, 2002; Rudes, Lerch & Taxman, 2011; Rukus et al., 2016). Additionally, in my research I located a qualitative article discussing perceptions of both male and female inmates who participated in a Prison Industries Employment program (Richmond, 2014). I also found one qualitative study on women participants in a work release program (Cantora, 2015). However, in a literature search of six online databases, I have found no qualitative experiential reports on the lived experiences of male offenders assigned specifically to a work release program. This represents a gap in the literature because the male offenders' experience is missing regarding whether or not they became gainfully employed while participating in the work release program. In addition, literature also did not address the ability of ex-offenders to maintain employment after transitioning back into society. Latessa (2012) found that when asked if a program was successful or not, program and policy makers were not concerned about the offender's perspective of being in the program. They were more concerned if the participants were less likely to recidivate (Latessa, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe unique experiences of male ex-offenders previously assigned to a work release program in an urban setting in an

Atlantic East Coast state. Individual and collective themes across the group were

identified. Further, the purpose was to ask participants what the impact of their

participation in the work release program was as they transitioned back into society.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study utilized a qualitative transcendental phenomenological

approach. My study involved conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews using

open-ended questions of male ex-offenders who previously participated in a work release

program. Utilizing a qualitative method to understand the personal experiences of

individuals involved in the criminal justice system far outweighs the information gained

through analysis of statistical data (Tewksbury, 2006). The goal of the researcher in

phenomenological research is to gather and describe factual data from the participants

(Groenewald, 2004).

Transcendental phenomenology is where the researcher sets aside preconceptions

or prejudgments (Moerer-Urdahl& Creswell, 2008; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas stated

that in transcendental phenomenology the researcher is flexible and open to viewing the

phenomenon as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher during my

research study, I had to bracket, or set aside, my biases, personal experiences and

theoretical knowledge through a process called the epoche (Moustakas, 1994).

The foundation of my phenomenological qualitative study was the lived

experiences of adult male individuals who had been previously assigned to a work release

program and served as the framework. The specific impact of the job search and work

release experiences is understudied in the literature. I explored issues such as seeking

employment while assigned to work release program during incarceration to include access to resources to be able to apply for jobs; interviewing experiences; and obtaining and maintaining employment with a livable wage after release.

The purpose of phenomenology is to gain an understanding of individual or shared experiences of individuals in a particular phenomenon (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992). Additionally, phenomenology research seeks to gather and describe factual data from the participants (Groenewald, 2004). Over 90% of ex-offenders are male (Schmitt & Warner, 2011). Therefore, the best approach for my study to obtain answers to my research questions was a qualitative methodological approach using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do male ex-offenders describe their lived experiences while they participated in a work release program located in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state?

Research Question 2: How do male ex-offenders describe the impact of their participation in a work release program as they transition back into society?

Theoretical Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) served as the framework for this study. EST comprises four environmental levels to include the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The lowest level is the microsystem where an individual in a specific setting has direct experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An example is the family

where the individual has a direct role, experiences, and social interactions with family

members (Neal, & Neal, 2013). The mesosystem involves social interactions among two

or more settings of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, a parent from

the home setting meets with the teacher from the child's school setting to discuss the

child (Neal, & Neal, 2013). The exosystem involves one or more settings in which the

individual does not have direct contact but can be affected by what occurs

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An example in this system is policy decisions that are made that

influence the individual's experiences (Neal & Neal, 2013). Finally the macrosystem is

the broader culture, subculture, or societal views (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal,

2013).

I used EST as a lens to understand how factors in an offender's life influenced

other parts of their transition back into society after going through the work release

program. The results of my study led to program and policy recommendations that may

or may not be adopted. This theoretical framework was also valuable in developing the

questions that participants were asked during the interview process. The interview

questions were developed to align with my research questions (See Appendix A).

Definitions of Terms

Collateral Consequence: A negative impact affecting an individual who has

already paid their dues to society either through a fine or incarceration when trying to

reenter society and make a positive contribution (Mauer & McCalmont, 2013).

Drug-related Offense: Possession or manufacturing of illegal drugs or controlled

substances with or without the intent to distribute, excluding alcohol. This may or may

not include possession of drug paraphernalia (Virginia Department of Criminal Justice

Services, 2009).

Ex-offender: Individual previously incarcerated and now released.

Felony: A crime committed in the United Stated that results in imprisonment

lasting typically more than one year (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016).

Inmate: An individual who is incarcerated.

Living wage: An hourly amount an individual must earn in order to sufficiently

provide for self or family (Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT], 2019).

Misdemeanor: A crime committed in the United States that may or may not result

in imprisonment lasting one year or less (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2016).

Recidivism: When an ex-offender is rearrested and re-incarcerated usually within

a three year period (National Institute of Justice, 2014).

Reentry or transitional services: When a former offender returns to society after a

period of being incarcerated and receiving support services prior to release.

Social Capital Support System: Family and friends who assist the ex-offender

facing barriers in gaining employment, housing, and other reentry challenges (Duwe&

Clark, 2013; Taylor, 2013).

Work Release: A program that allows for an incarcerated individual to leave

supervised custody to work in the community each day for a period of time (returning to

custody after work) to gain work experience prior to release (Cerda et al., 2015).

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made regarding the participants of my study: (a) participants will be able to understand English; (b) participants will have the mental capacity to comprehend and respond to interview questions; and (c) participants will be honest in answering questions. Additionally, awareness of my biases was acknowledged and either minimized or eliminated. This is important to ensure credibility and confirmability

Scope and Delimitations

My research study sample size was small potentially making generalizing the findings difficult. The geographic area of this study was limited to former participants of the studied Work Release program. No female participants of the work release program were interviewed; only male participants were interviewed. Because the work release program is not open to those with violence charges or sex offenders, this study did not take into consideration those participants with violent or sex-related charges, such as murder or other assault charges. Finally, my study was not designed to measure the effectiveness of the work release program. Therefore, it may have limited transferability of the study's findings to other geographic locations with either lower or higher cost of living or jobs availability.

Limitations and Biases

One limitation is due to the sensitivity of working with a vulnerable population who may continue with illegal behavior after release. Additionally, the sample size was

small. However, the methodology I chose does not require a large sample. Regardless, I actively utilized snowball sampling to reach this population.

Researcher Bias

Bias on my part, as the researcher, is another limitation of a qualitative study. Epoche is a Greek word, whereby the researcher sets aside any prejudgments upfront (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008). Even though I have not had a direct experience as a felon or as an employee working in a work release program, I do know individuals who have a felony record and participated in transitional or work release programs prior to release from incarceration. My personal values, opinions, interest and theories to name a few are considered preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2012). It was important that bracketing occurred during my data collection. This study utilized the transcendental phenomenology method, which helped to minimize this limitation.

An additional potential limitation of the particular method I selected is safety (Jacques, 2014). Jacques (2014) stated:"Qualitative criminologists have been threatened, stalked, robbed, and murdered for reasons stemming from their research with active offenders" (p. 320).Because I interviewed former offenders I submitted the appropriate and proper paperwork and obtained IRB approval to address any safety concerns for both my participants and myself.

Significance of the Study

This qualitative research study may contribute to existing data on work release programs in the state. Previously incarcerated individuals are attempting to enter or reenter the workforce in greater numbers now and in the years to come (Duwe & Clark,

2014; Flatt & Jacobs, 2018; Phillips, 2010; Schmitt & Warner, 2011). Unemployment contributes to a tremendous loss of potential output (Schmitt & Warner, 2011). It is estimated that this amount is somewhere between $57 and $65 billion a year (Schmitt & Warner, 2011). Since work release participants are the beneficiaries of the program, it is important to understand the essence of their experience. The data obtained from my study may provide valuable information about work release program experiences and the impact those experiences have on continued employment so that these individuals can make a positive contribution to society after release. Furthermore, this information may help inform policy and programmatic decision-making for the work release center.

Positive social change may emerge after informing the corrections community and policy makers about how work release offenders' experience gaining and subsequently maintaining or not, employment during their transition back into the community so that they can be productive, self-sufficient, law-abiding and contributing members of society. As a result, the information gained from this study may be useful to devise programming to meet the unique needs and obstacles the stigma current offenders, and subsequently former offenders, face in obtaining employment.

Summary

In my study, I explored the lived experiences of former participants in the work release program in an urban east coast state. This chapter covers background information justifying the need to fill the gap in the literature. I have identified a gap specifically in qualitative research regarding the perspective of those who are actual participants of work release programs. The conceptual framework that was used to develop research

questions in this study was EST. My goal with this study was to increase understanding of the impact of participation in the work release program based on the actual lived experiences of former participants. The two research questions I used to guide this qualitative study were: (a) How do male ex-offenders describe their lived experiences while they participated in a work release program located in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state?; and (b) How do male ex-offenders describe the impact of their participation in a work release program as they transition back into society?

In my transcendental phenomenological study, I conducted semi-structured interviews to gather information regarding the experiences of former work release participants. I made the assumption that these individuals would be willing to share their experiences with me and provide honest answers. For this study, I focused on only one work release program of formerly incarcerated individuals. Limitations anticipated were that there would be a small sample size, and potentially safety issues and researcher bias. However, as mentioned, the significance of this study may prove beneficial to policy and program experts involved in continuing or revising work release programming to meet the unique needs and obstacles this vulnerable population faces as they transition back into society upon release from being incarcerated. As such, this design was constructed to address Research Question 1 and Research Question 2.

In Chapter 2, I describe my literature search strategy. I include literature identified in support of this topic along with literature addressing the theoretical framework and methodology. The review also presents a discussion on transitional programs and addresses the gap that supports the need for this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Research has shown that recidivism can occur for those who lack employment and access to economic resources after being released from incarceration (Brown, 2011; Burt, 2014; Duwe, 2015; Routh & Hamilton, 2015). Further, criminological theories support employment as a deterrence to criminal behavior (Duwe, 2015). Being employed not only provides resources to pay ones' way but also gives one a sense of self-worth (Latessa, 2012). Additionally, employment allows one to make a positive contribution to society (Latessa, 2012). Furthermore, in many instances, a condition of probation is to be gainfully employed (Pogrebin, West-Smith, Walker & Unnithan, 2014). Finally, many offenders have financial obligations that occurred before, during and after incarceration, to include mandatory court fees, making employment a high priority for successful reentry (Pogrebin et al., 2014).

However, many ex-offenders are experiencing unsuccessful attempts and challenges at securing suitable employment (Brown, 2011; Burt, 2014; Gunnison and Helfgott, 2011; Jung, 2015; Routh & Hamilton, 2015). While many articles address employment as a prevention to recidivating, those returning to society are finding barriers to successfully obtaining employment (Rukus et al., 2016). In addition to discussing reentry programs, in Chapter 2 I also address the many barriers an ex-offender faces in obtaining employment. Finally, Chapter 2 discusses articles addressing Bronfenbrenner's EST.

Literature Search Strategy

Criminal justice reform and reintegration back into society has been a topic of concern for many years. The April 2019 unemployment rate was 3.6% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). While that statistic does not appear to be high, finding employment is challenging even for those without a criminal background, and who possess skills and/or formal education. In 2018, the unemployment rate was 5.6% for those who possessed less than a high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). For those who had a high school diploma but no college, the unemployment rate was 4.1% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

My literature review strategy was to focus on locating the most current and relevant peer-reviewed journal articles. To locate current peer-reviewed journals, I limited my search to the last 10 years, focusing primarily on the last 5 years. For some searches I combined search terms listed below.

I searched for articles with the following key words, some in conjunction with others *reentry, reintegration, transitional services, work release, felon (ex), offender (ex), offender rehabilitation, inmate, employment, education, skills, social, family,* and *barrier.* I also searched articles using the terms *social, family,* and *barriers* because they emerged as major themes in articles from my initial search. While education, skills, work experience and opportunity are all important factors that influence employment, I found social ties, family involvement and other various barriers also played a role for former inmates transitioning back into society upon release from incarceration. Because I was interested in exploring the lived experiences of former offenders in a work release

program, I also searched for the term, *qualitative* in conjunction with the terms above in

seeking articles. Finally, I also searched articles using the name *Bronfenbrenner* and the

term, *systems theory*.

I retrieved research from multiple sources. Searches for peer-reviewed journal

articles were conducted in Academic Search Complete, Bureau of Justice Statistics,

EBSCO, PsycINFO, SAGE Premier, Taylor and Francis Online. Additionally, more

specific and current data was retrieved from the Bureau of Justice Statistics database;

Bureau of Labor Statistics website; ProQuest Criminal Justice and the Thoreau Multi-

Database.

All databases searched provided a plethora of peer-reviewed journal articles to

review and use as supporting documentation in my study. However, while I found some

quantitative articles on work release programs, I only found a few older peer-reviewed

qualitative articles describing lived experiences of former participants of a work release

program.

One of former United States President, Barack Obama's goals for his

Administration was criminal justice reform (White House, 2015b). As such, while not

necessarily for the literature review section, but for the overall study, I also culled

through speeches, fact sheets and other documentation from the Obama Administration

White House website. In addition, I retrieved relevant reports and studies from other

federal organization websites such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National

Institute of Corrections both under the United States Department of Justice and the

Reentry Policy Council located within The Council of States Government Justice Center website.

Additionally, since my the time of my study crossed presidential administrations from Democrat President Obama to Republican President Trump, I again culled through speeches, fact sheets and other documentation from the Trump Administration White House website. While not the focus of my study since it is at the federal level, I identified that criminal justice reform is a bipartisan effort. After over a decade of consideration by both Republicans and Democrats alike, President Trump signed the Formerly Incarcerated Reenter Society Transformed Safely Transitioning Every Person (First Step) Act (Head, 2019). Finally, since I was interested in making a difference in my own community, I also conducted searches in criminal justice websites in my state.

Transitional Programs/Reentry Resources

Across the country, reentry programs are being offered to individuals returning to society, to assist with an effortless transition (Cohen, 2017; Hall, 2015; Wikoff, Linhorst, & Morani, 2012).Similarly, in Routh and Hamilton's (2015) literature research in preparation for their quantitative study, they found participating in work release programs prepared offenders for a successful reentry into the community. Work release programs, if available, provide offenders an opportunity to seek employment prior to release while residing in a location that is less confining than the jail (Duwe, 2015).

The concept of work release programs is not new. Work release programs have been implemented since the early 1920s (Turner & Petersilia, 1996). Many studies I read focused on reducing recidivism as the goal for instituting a variety of reentry programs.

Not only may aspects of these programs help to reduce recidivism, but inmates who have access to participate in work release programs may also be provided an opportunity to gain employment prior to release (Duwe & Clark, 2014). The concept of the work release program is to provide inmates with an opportunity to enhance work skills to help them maintain or gain new employment post-release (Turner & Petersilia, 1996).

In addition to abstaining from further illegal activity, a requirement while on probation is securing employment (Pogrebin et al., 2014). Therefore, it is in the best interest of corrections institutions to coordinate with corrections-based and community organizations to provide comprehensive transition services to ensure successful integration. In fact, Hall (2015) has expressed there is a need for more research on correctional employment programs.

After conducting an extensive literature review, Pogrebin et al.(2014) found evidence that securing suitable employment upon release from prison is not only beneficial but also a key predictor of success of a former offender from recidivating. Likewise, authors Duwe and Clark (2014) conducted a study and also found there are positive benefits to inmates of participating in job training and education while still incarcerated. A focus should be on transitioning ex-offenders into the community as productive, employed, contributing members of society. This is not only beneficial in helping to reduce recidivism rates and prison population, but also to ensure a successful reentry of the former offender into society (Cheliotis, 2008).

However, not all reentry programs are alike and resources available to inmates vary (Rukus et al., 2016; Schmitt & Warner, 2011). Contrary to the research stated

above, Latessa (2012), who supports the importance of employment, found in his research that the majority of studies did not show employment programs alone reduce recidivism. Regardless, offenders can gain a wide array of benefits when working while incarcerated.

Author Richmond (2014) conducted a similar qualitative study on both men and women in a correctional industries program. The goal of the study was to gain insight from their perspective on the program and its impact on their behavior and if what they learned was transferable once released (Richmond, 2014). The prison industries program provides opportunities to gain vocational training and work experience (Richmond, 2014). Individuals are trained in a specific vocation unique to the prison's needs such as license-plate manufacturing; sewing; woodworking or electronics recycling and then provided a job (Richmond, 2014). The intent of this program is to provide them with structured work and a salary while incarcerated with the hope they can transfer their work ethics and skill to gain employment after release (Richmond, 2014).

Seventy inmates were asked open-ended interview questions (Richmond, 2014). The findings revealed that they were all appreciative of the opportunity to work because it made them feel like they were not incarcerated (Richmond, 2014). They also felt more motivated to do a good job because they did not want to lose their job and go back to just sitting in prison (Richmond, 2014). A positive effect was they gained a good work ethic and pride in the work they were doing (Richmond, 2014). They were also able to earn money to send home to family and feel a sense of pride that they could provide for their families as well as save some money for when they were released (Richmond, 2014).

So while beneficial when incarcerated, the downside to the prison industries program is that the participant cannot continue in the program once released (Richmond, 2014). There are few opportunities outside of prison to utilize the specifics skills they gained to do the jobs offered while incarcerated (Richmond, 2014). However, as stated before, employment while incarcerated has many other benefits such as providing structure in their day, opportunity to develop a good work ethics, and ability to learn a new skill. It can also instill a sense of pride and self-confidence all that can be beneficial to the individual once released.

Author Cantora (2015) conducted a similar qualitative study on women assigned to a work release program. The goal of Cantora's study was to explore the employment barriers women who participated in a work release half-way house experienced. Cantora interviewed 33 women who were residents of the New Jersey Halfway House between June and November 2007. Of the 33 women interviewed, 29 of the interviews were recorded and copious notes were taken for four who refused to be tape recorded (Cantora, 2015). Participants of the program were assigned an employment counselor who provided job search strategies as well as money for transportation to job search (Cantora, 2015).

Cantora's findings revealed that they 76% of the women were able to find employment within 30 days of arrival at the half-way house. Those who were not able to locate employment were required to enroll in a variety of program offerings to include education, mental health or drug rehabilitation (Cantora, 2015).

Additionally, Cantora's research findings revealed that their experiences in locating employment included job search barriers and frustration. The half-way house imposed many rules on them while they were out searching. Participants had to make what was called "accountability calls" to inform their whereabouts (Cantora, 2015). Furthermore, they were required to get employers they visited to sign off as proof they sought employment which was humiliating (Cantora, 2015). Not only that, they felt it negatively affected their gaining employment (Cantora, 2015). They had limited time to search for employment and if they were late they face disciplinary action to include being returned to jail (Cantora, 2015).

Due to the requirement that they must find a job within 30 days, most chose to take entry-level jobs that made quicker offers even if they had higher skills or education (Cantora, 2015). The program required additional restrictions on the participants making it difficult to secure employment (Cantora, 2015). Participants could not work an overnight job or at places that did not have a telephone (Cantora, 2015). Finally, some had difficulty searching for employment without a support network (Cantora, 2015). Even with the challenges, most were appreciative of the opportunity to work because it was better than being in jail (Cantora, 2015).

The findings revealed a benefit of the program was that they had a variety of job search support while in the program to include an employment counselor, a job readiness center with computer access and social networks (Cantora, 2015). Unfortunately, most of the participants said they would not keep the job they acquired in the program after

release primarily due to the job location in relation to where they will return to upon release (Cantora, 2015).

In Sullivan County, New Hampshire, the recidivism rate was 68%. In review of the Transitional Reentry and Inmate Life Skills (TRAILS) program in New Hampshire, Cohen (2017) found that policy makers agreed it was more important to invest in community corrections to reduce recidivism. Instead of investing $42 million building a new jail, they spent only $7.1 million in a community corrections program (Cohen 2017).

The TRAILS program provides employment assistance, programs in life skills, substance abuse and addiction programs. In addition, they provide mental health counselors and a 12-month follow-up program after release (Cohen, 2017). After 3 years, the recidivism rate decreased to 20% (Cohen 2017). One reason it worked so well was the investment in programming and staff both during and after release (Cohen 2017). The program also has cooperative relationships with employers in the area willing to give participants and opportunity (Cohen 2017).

Social Capital Support Systems

Having family and friends support is crucial to an ex-offender upon release from incarceration (Rukus et al., 2016; Taylor, 2013; White House, 2015b). In a study conducted by Visher et al. (2011), the authors found that having a network with local employers and positive family relationships improved the likelihood of gaining employment. In the literature review conducted as part of the Pogrebin et al. (2014) study, the authors also found having a family support system for the inmate was critical to a successful reentry. Those individuals who are visited and communicated with family

members during incarceration tended to fare better after released (Berg & Huebner, 2011; White House, 2015b). Supportive family and friends can offer hope and encouragement to those incarcerated. Family and friends can also be a valuable networking resource to find employment (Pogrebin et al., 2014).

Offenders who are able to rely on social networks have more success in securing employment upon release (Taylor, 2013). In a quantitative study conducted by Mown and Fisher (2015) they found previously incarcerated individuals who had positive social bonds with family members had more success in gaining employment. Moreover, Mowen and Visher (2015) reported that families of incarcerated individuals suggested providing joint counseling as a part of a reentry program. Such a program would be beneficial to them in building trust and enhancing their relationship with each other prior to release (Mowen & Visher, 2015).

Unfortunately, in instances where the length of incarceration is extensive, some individuals may lose contact with family and friends (Jung, 2015). Family members may feel stress and the relationship may become strained (Rukus et al., 2016). Those individuals who lose this support tend to face more difficulty finding employment without a support and network system to tap into upon release (Richmond, 2014; Schmitt & Warner, 2011; Taylor, 2013). In fact, even with a job, lack of social capital may be a barrier for the former felon in maintaining their employment.

Further, the findings of a quantitative study conducted by researchers Berg and Huebner (2011) also found that offenders who had familial social ties were both more successful in gaining and maintaing employment upon release. On the other hand,

researchers Bahr, Harris, Fisher and Armstrong (2010) found, after conducting a mixed

method research study of 51 parolees, that sometimes reconnecting with previous friends

after release may lead offenders back into deviant behaviors. This suggests that even

with positive family relationships it is important that former offenders do not fall back

into environments and relationships with previous friends who do not have their best

interests at hand.

Researcher Taylor (2013) conducted a qualitative study on the *Supervision to Aid*

Reentry (STAR) programme which found offenders who had social capital resources had

access to more employment opportunities. Although the STAR program was voluntary

upon release, the results of the study proved maintaining family and friends ties greatly

assisted in helping individuals secure employment (Taylor, 2013). Therefore, it is

imperative to explore the lived experiences from those who have participated in a

program. This knowledge may be able to inform policy makers of what leads to success

in these programs and, what, if any barriers felons face in obtaining employment.

However, Mears, Cochran, and Cullen (2015) discussed there is little research on

the effectiveness of incarceration and alternative treatment based on varying demographic

and social groups as well as the settings ex-offenders return to after release. As such, I

wanted to explore, from the participants perspective, how they describe the impact of

their participation in a work release program as they transitioned back into their home

setting in a suburban Atlantic east coast state.

Barriers

Research has shown that those who have been employed prior to incarceration, are older, Caucasian, and not under mental health care (Rukus, et al., 2016). These individuals tended to fare better in transition programs (Rukus, et al., 2016). However, when released, the majority of ex-offenders face a gamut of barriers to obtaining employment (Cantora, 2015; Pogrebin et al., 2014; Taylor, 2013). It is important to explore barriers to successful employment in order to make recommendations to policy makers of reentry programs. The following sections will address a variety of barriers individuals returning to society face after incarceration in their efforts to obtain and maintain sustainable employment.

Lack of Education or Skills

Regardless of whether a former offender or not, there is a direct correlation between lack of education and skill level and unemployment (Duwe & Clark, 2014). The offender population as a whole, tends to be less-educated or under-skilled (Rukus et al., 2016). In their research, Duwe and Clark (2014) found that previously incarcerated males made greater than 10% less earnings and worked more than two months less per year than individuals not incarcerated. Another significant barrier in obtaining employment after incarceration is lack of education or skills (Hall, 2015).

Authors Cerda, Stenstrom, and Curtis (2015) in their extensive literature research, supports this finding that those with little job qualifications had a more difficult time returning to the workforce after incarceration. This, coupled with an unstable work history or unemployment prior to incarceration, makes it difficult for an individual to

obtain employment after release (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Duwe & Clark, 2014). Further, length of incarceration can have a negative effect on an individual's current job preparedness (Schmitt & Warner, 2011). This is especially true for those who are incarcerated at a young age (Jung, 2015). Individuals who become incarcerated in their teens lose out on valuable high school education (Jung, 2015). Likewise, those who are incarcerated in their twenties lose out on gaining job experience (Jung, 2015).

Economic Recession Effect on Unemployment

A huge barrier for many reentering the workforce is the mere fact that there are few job opportunities (Cerda et al., 2015). There is no question that economic recession has a detrimental effect on job availability for all (Nally et al., 2014). In her review of studies on recidivism, Hall (2015) found evidence that unemployment may compel individuals to re-offend. Likewise, Valentine and Redcross (2015) state researchers surmise that poor labor market conditions can lead to recidivism because former offenders cannot obtain employment. Additionally, when there is an economic recession even jobs in construction or manufacturing are unavailable (Nally et al., 2014). Even if the individual did not have the stigma of being a former offender or felon, obtaining employment is difficult when living in a struggling economy. Low-skilled individuals who do not have criminal backgrounds are competing for the same jobs those returning to society (Pogrebin et al., 2014). Economic conditions can also have an impact on job opportunities (Cantora, 2015). According to the MIT (2019) living wage calculator, the hourly living wage for the area of my study was $17.44 for one adult. As such, a

successful reentry for a prisoner reentering in a high cost metropolitan area can be

challenging.

Technology

Finally, while a benefit to employers, the availability of technology to provide

real-time information to employers can be a barrier or detriment to the ex-offender.

Seventy percent of individuals are asked at some point about their criminal background in

the hiring process (Denver, Pickett, & Bushway, 2018). Current technology provides

employers with the ability to conduct quick background checks on potential employees

(Paul-Emile, 2014). A problem that can arise is inaccurate criminal background reports

(Paul-Emile, 2014). Due to inaccurate or reports that are not up-to-date in local

databases, some individuals are denied employment upfront (Paul-Emile, 2014). The

problem arises because it takes away the ex-offenders' opportunity to explain or clarify.

The ability for an ex-offender to review their criminal records prior to any derogatory

information being seen by potential employers would help eliminate some of the

inaccurate information or at least the element of surprise (Myrick, 2013). To help prevent

that, in 2012 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission issued "Enforcement

Guidance on the Consideration of Arrest and Conviction Records in Employment

Decisions Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964". This act was amended in

2012 due to the fact that employers had more access to technology. The purpose of this

guidance is to protect employees and potential employees if employers misuse any

criminal background they found (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission,

2012).

Moreover, not only is false background data a barrier for an ex-offender seeking employment, the mere fact that they must answer questions regarding a prior criminal history on job applications has been found to be an immediate barrier (Henry & Jacobs, 2007). Again, not allowing for the individual to explain their charge and the fact that they have paid their dues to society has caused individuals loss of job opportunities.

There have been attempts to "ban the box" (BTB) (Denver et al., 2018; Henry & Jacobs, 2007). BTB is an initiative to remove questions regarding an individual's criminal history from job applications (Denver et al., 2018; Henry & Jacobs, 2007). While this is a noble attempt to assist ex-offenders, in most cases, removing the question(s) upfront only moves the inevitable further down the hiring process. However, if the individual lies in order to gain employment, and the criminal history is discovered later, it may be grounds for not only termination but also a probation violation (Pogrebin et al., 2014).

Authors Denver, Pickett, and Bushway (2018) conducted a study entitled: Criminal records and employment: A survey of experiences and attitudes in the United States. Hawaii was the first state to adopt BTB in 1998. As of 2016, only half of the United States has adopted BTB (Denver et al., 2018). Their findings showed that call backs for interviews and job offers increased after implementation of BTB (Denver et al., 2018). However, this does not always mean an individual is hired. Hiring managers may be ready to offer a position but when the selection goes to the Human Resources department and a fuller background investigation is conducted, a potential employee may be removed from consideration (Denver et al., 2018). The background investigation may

take time and if the applicant is disqualified, the hiring process would have to begin all

over (Denver et al., 2018). In some cases managers may skirt the laws and ask these

questions prior to a conducting a full background investigation (Denver et al., 2018).

Finally, although I did not find much research on the process of applying for jobs,

many businesses now require the applicant to apply online to be considered for a job.

This may pose a challenge if the individual does not have access to a computer as well as

internet access. This barrier could be resolved by utilizing a computer with internet

access at the local public library. However, this assumes one has transportation and

access to get to the library.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Authors Onwuegbuzie, Collins, and Frels (2013) discussed how EST could be

used in research. Level 1, the micro-system, is where individuals are studied within their

own environment (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Under level 2, the mesosystem the

individual(s) are studied within other systems they may be involved (Onwuegbuzie et al.,

2013). The exosystem, level 3, can be used to study individuals who are influenced by

other systems but they do not play a direct role (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Finally, level

4, the macrosystem, can be used to study individuals within the broader societal, cultural

world in which they live (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Levels 2 through 4 should support

the individuals being studied in level 1. Author Zhang (2018) further described how EST

could be used in research when providing academic advising to international college

students. Findings in his research revealed information that advisors could use to more

effectively advise international students (Zhang, 2018). Likewise, authors Lau and Ng

(2014) applied Bronfenbrenner's EST model to further counseling training understanding. They studied counseling trainees in a classroom setting (microsystem); their interaction with faculty (mesosystem); further interactions with faculty, supervisors, and clients (exosystem); and the counseling trainee's overall environment (macrosystem) (Lau & Ng, 2014). Their findings recommended an evaluation model to aid in assessing training environments for students training to be counselors (Lau & Ng, 2014).

Using Bronfenbrenner's EST framework was helpful to me in developing interview questions. The questions I developed enabled me to address external factors to the person returning to society. The responses to the questions revealed that the macrosystem characteristics had an influence on the individuals' experience in returning to society in an attempt toobtain sustainable employment. Therefore, it is important to know how family support, Federal and, or state financial support, and the economic conditions of their neighborhood influence their return to society.

Authors Orrock and Clark (2015) utilized EST in a qualitative study to assess lived experiences of at-risk African males who were successful in school. The authors wanted to know what contributed to their success using EST as a lens to examine their environment (Orrock & Clark, 2015). Findings from the study suggested that counselors could use EST as a framework to discover the challenges some students faced and recommendations so they can empower other at risk children (Orrock & Clark, 2015). Additionally, the authors found EST valuable in interpreting data and connections across all systems (Orrock & Clark, 2015).

Likewise, authors Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, and Baartman (2009) used Bronfenbrenner's theory as a framework when studying Native American teenagers and resiliency. Using EST, they authors developed interview questions under each environmental subsystem.

Under the first layer, the microsystem, the authors sought responses from the teens' interpersonal interactions with their family, friends and school (Feinstein et al., 2009). The next system, meso, they looked at the parents and friends attitudes (Feinstein et al., 2009). Under the next layer, exosystem, they asked the teens to describe their relationship with their families (Feinstein et al., 2009). Additionally, they asked the youth to describe their communities under the macrosystem (Feinstein et al., 2009). Going a layer further, they looked at the chronosystem, asking them to describe the impact of white culture within their Native American culture (Feinstein et al., 2009).

Based on the results of the interviews using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, authors Feinsteinet al.(2009) found it affirmed individual and environmental factors. As a result, they were able to provide recommendations to inform educators.

Using EST I was able to obtain a more holistic picture of the individuals I interviewed and how each system may have influenced their experiences in the work release program. One reason to study systems was to pinpoint successful experiences in one system and apply it to systems where individuals struggle (Orrock & Clark, 2015). I used EST as a framework to develop open-ended interview questions to elucidate what various experiences as well as support systems shaped the individuals. Once these areas were identified, the theoretical framework was used to anticipate what would be the

individuals' most successful approach to transitioning back into society. My goal to use Bronfenbrenner's EST was to develop appropriate interview questions to gain knowledge in my study to inform policy makers and work release program developers.

Summary

It is inevitable that many offenders will be released back into society (Duwe & Clark, 2014; Flatt & Jacobs, 2018; Phillips, 2010; Schmitt & Warner, 2011). The review of current literature reveals that offenders face a variety of barriers in seeking employment and insurmountable financial obligations when returning to society after release. Returnees placed on probation upon reentry are required to be gainfully employed, reframe from illegal drug use, not leave the state and in many situations may also need to seek new friends because they cannot associate with other felons (Bahr et al., 2010).

Since offenders are the intended beneficiaries of work release programs it would be prudent to gain their perspective of their participation in the program during and after participation. It is anticipated this study fills the gap in literature by providing a qualitative study. A research study that captured the lived experiences of male individuals who were former participants of a work release program. The results may provide lawmakers, social practitioners, and policy-makers insight on how offenders experienced the job search as participants in a work release program. One that encompasses the whole hiring process. Including the documentation needed and process to apply for a job, interviewing, and the pre-employment screening or background check, all leading up to a job offer or declination.

In Chapter 3 I describe the method I used to gather data on actual lived experiences of adult male offenders who have participated in a work release program. This data may prove beneficial to program developers to improve upon work release program offerings. This could be achieved by providing additional resources to ensure those returning to society will have a successful job search experience while in the program. This may lead to gaining sustainable employment that will carry over upon reentry to society to be able to meet their basic needs, legal and financial obligations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe unique experiences of male ex-offenders previously assigned to a work release program in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state. Collective themes across the group were identified. Additionally, the purpose was to ask participants what the impact of their participation was as they transitioned back into society.

In this chapter, I explain the exploratory approach that I used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of participants seeking employment while in the work release program. Current studies do not expand upon the perceptions of participants in the work release program regarding their participation seeking employment opportunities. Research on the lived experiences of work release program participants both during, and whether or not they were able to maintain employment after release, is crucial to fill the identified gap in the literature. In Chapter 3, I also restate the research questions I designed to explore the phenomenon under study. The rationale for using a transcendental phenomenological design is discussed. Further, I discuss my role as researcher, including the mitigation of bias. In the methodology section of this chapter I discuss my criteria for selection of participants and recruitment strategy along with rationale for proposed sample size and use of snowball sampling strategy. In addition, I discuss how my data was collected using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that I developed. I discuss my interview protocol with regards to how the interviews were documented and stored to meet privacy

considerations. Additionally, I discuss my data analysis plan .Chapter 3 addresses the issues of trustworthiness to include transferability, dependability and credibility. The chapter also discusses ethical procedures to ensure protection of the participants. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions guiding my study were as follows:

Research Question 1: How do male ex-offenders describe their lived experiences while they participated in a work release program located in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state?

Research Question 2: How do male ex-offenders describe the impact of their participation in a work release program as they transition back into society?

Central Concept

My study employed a transcendental qualitative research design in the tradition of Moustakas to describe participants' experiences while participating in a work release program. My objective was to understand the lived experiences of the participants I was studying. The phenomenon of interest in this study was the experiences of participants seeking to gain employment while participating in the work release program and ability to maintain employment after release.

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Utilizing a qualitative method to understand the personal experiences of individuals involved in the criminal justice system far outweighs the information gained through analysis of statistical data (Tewksbury, 2009). The individuals interviewed are

an integral to their environment (Flood, 2010). The goal of the researcher in phenomenology research is to gather and describe factual data from the participants (Groenewald, 2004). Meaning may be revealed from the research conducted (Flood, 2010). I found some reports on success or failure of transitional programs but I wanted to explore from a participants' perspective what they experienced and felt worked or did not work while they were participating in a work release program.

Rationale for Transcendental Phenomenological Approach

The nature of this study was a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach. When a researcher has preconceptions, prejudices or assumptions that need to be set aside, they must address them (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008; Moustakas, 1994; Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). The process I followed is called transcendental phenomenology. Under this process researchers must be flexible and ensure they view the phenomenon as if they are seeing it fresh, as if for the first time and be open to all viewpoints (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, as the researcher, I had to bracket, or set aside, my biases, personal experiences and theoretical knowledge under a process called the epoche (Moustakas, 1994).

The thrust of this phenomenological qualitative study was the experiences of adult male participants of a local work release program and served as the framework. Participants in a work release program may face a variety of challenges in obtaining employment. Some of the challenges that were explored included access to resources while seeking employment. Additionally, I explored the participants' experiences in obtaining and maintaining employment after release. As such, the best approach for this

study was a qualitative methodological approach using Moustakas' transcendental

phenomenology. I chose this method because I wanted to learn the actual lived

experiences of individuals participating in the local work release program. The program

is for their benefit so it is prudent that their needs are met. Setting aside all preconceived

biases, using one-on-one interviews with each participant provided a better understanding

the lived experiences of the participants. The data collected and the analysis method used

unveiled a more inclusive understanding of the lived experiences of these participants

from their own personal perspective. Use of this method allowed me to gain honest

feedback and valuation information to share with policy makers to make informed

decisions on the future of the work release program.

Consideration of other Approaches

Similar to phenomenology, case study design also focuses on gaining an

understanding of experiences within a real-life setting (Baškarada, 2014). Under a case

study approach, researchers focus on conducting in-depth research on a single or multi-

subjects(Baškarada, 2014). An interview is the primary data collection method in a

phenomenology approach even though documents, observations, and other records may

be considered as well (Flood, 2010). However, under the case study approach, evidence

is obtained from multiple data collection methods to be analyzed (Baškarada, 2014). In

my study,it was highly unlikely that multiple sources of data would be available to me to

analyze.

Likewise, a narrative approach can provide researchers with rich, in-depth data of

an individual (Josselson, 2006). The purpose of the narrative design is to gather

detailedinformation in an effort to convey an individual's story (Josselson, 2006). The goal of my study was to describe the essence of the experiences of several former inmates in the work release program. Therefore, the narrative approach would not be appropriate.

The purpose of phenomenology is to gain an understanding of individual or shared experiences of individuals in a particular phenomenon (Flood, 2010). Phenomenology research seeks to gather and describe factual data from the participants which can be obtained through an active interview method (Flood, 2010). As such, a phenomenology, specifically a transcendental phenomenology approach, was best suited for this study to answer my research questions.

Role of the Researcher

My study involved face-to-face interviews of male ex-offenders assigned to participate in a work release program. The goal of the researcher in phenomenology research is to gather and describe factual data from the participants (Groenewald, 2004). In qualitative research, the researcher serves as an instrument (Xu & Storr, 2012). For my study I collected and analyzed data to be able to provide informed recommendations (Xu & Storr, 2012). Additionally, in a phenomenological study the researcher has a personal desire to seek information (Moustakas, 1994). I have a passion to help formerly incarcerated individuals in my local community. I have a desire to understand the personal experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals who were assigned to the local work release program. As a scholar practitioner I took the time to get to know my participants prior to the official interview beginning to put them at ease. During the interview I asked about their lived experiences in a non-judgmental fashion.

Researcher Bias

Assisting this vulnerable population in sustaining gainful employment has been a long-time passion of mine. I have an undergraduate degree in personnel administration and have been working in the human resources career field for over 35 years. While I do not work professionally with work release or transitional programs or even in the criminal justice arena, I personally know individuals who participated in transitional programs prior to release. It is crucial that as researcher, I acknowledge this and develop a strategy to mitigate any potential bias to ensure validity of my research. Therefore, in my role as the researcher, I underwent the epoche process and bracketed, or set aside, my personal direct or indirect experiences and biases.

In order to minimize my bias I used several recommended tactics. I began the interviews by being fair-minded (Mehra, 2002). I asked my participants open-ended questions so that I did not lead them in any particular direction (Mehra, 2002). I was also mindful of my body language that it did not indicate approval or disapproval with their responses (Mehra, 2002).

Additionally, I explained appropriate informed consent paperwork and ensured the participants completed it prior to conducting my study. Furthermore, during my interviews I remained focused, took a non-judgmental approach, and made a concerted effort to build trust with my participants (Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). One way to build trust was to be honest with my participants (Mehra, 2002). I shared with them my limited background knowledge and experience regarding the work release program. Additionally, I tape recorded my field notes so I could focus on their responses

and give them my undivided attention as well as to ensure accuracy (Mehra, 2002). In an effort to gain accurate information, I sought to understand the participants' experiences with an open mind and clear conscious.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Participants weremale ex-offenders who were assigned from the general jail population to participate in a work release program within the ADC located in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state, whether they got a job or not during the program. These individuals were asked open-ended questions to discover their experiences, perceptions, and reflections as participants in this specific work release program.

Sample Size

My population consisted of male ex-offenders who previously participated in an urban setting, Atlantic East Coast state, work release program. While there is no hard and fast rule of how large the sample size should be, Mason (2010), in his research of experts in the field, found that for qualitative studies the sample size ranged from 5 to 50. One explanation for the wide range is that qualitative work is laborious and typically after a certain point, no new information is derived (Mason, 2010). The key many experts stressed was when saturation is reached, you have enough (Mason, 2010). While there is also no definitive answer to knowing when saturation has been reached, it is important that I as the researcher ensure saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Some factors that should be taken into consideration include complexity of data gathered, researcher and reviewer skill and experience, and ensuring analysis is not completed too quickly that

some data is overlooked (Guest et al., 2006). For phenomenology studies, the sample

size can be as small as 5 participants (Mason, 2010). Due to potentially a difficult and

hidden population I was seeking, my sample size fell on lower end at 5 participants.

Sampling Strategy

As offenders, the population I interviewed was a vulnerable population. These

individuals also suffered from the stigma of being a convicted criminal. Some may have

also suffered from mental illness and addiction but I did not delve into this area. The

sampling strategy I utilized was snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is when the

researcher is trying to find a hidden population (Noy, 2008; Waters, 2015). Hidden

populations are those who may suffer from stigmas or feel marginalized (Noy, 2008). As

such, to locate an adequate sample size of at least 5 individuals from this vulnerable

population, my sample strategy employed snowball sampling.

Recruitment of Participants

Prior to recruitment and data collection, I sought and obtained approval from the

Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). My snowballing strategy, while

lengthy was effective in providing me with 5 participants.

Once eligibility of having participated in the work release program was

ascertained, I identified each individual with an assigned number beginning with P1 for

participant one. Each participant received a consent form at an agreed upon location

when we met at a pre-established time and place for the interview.

As the interview process continued, no new information was being revealed

indicating that saturation had been met. I did not need to go to any businesses or legal

facilities to reach my population. Additionally, since I had found 5 participants, my

follow-up plan to interview current work release participants at a later date upon release,

was not necessary. As a result, I did not have to delay my study.

Instrumentation

It is important a written interview protocol be available (University of Michigan

[UMI], 2017). This is especially beneficial if the conversation digresses from the main

topic to get the interview back on track. Since my study was a qualitative study with the

goal of exploring lived experiences of participants in a local work release program an

interview was sufficient to obtain data.

I developed an interview protocol (See Appendix B) using both open-ended and

semi-structured interview questions that were designed by me with the intent to obtain

data and explore the experiences of participants in a work release program. In

developing my questions I used Bronfenbrenner's EST framework to help address some

of the external factors these individuals were facing. It is also imperative that the

relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is harmonious and the

interviewee does not feel threatened by the interviewer (UMI, 2017). Taking time to

build a good rapport with each interviewee is beneficial in obtaining rich quality data

(Anyan, 2013). It was important that I encouraged the interviewees to feel free to speak

candidly (Anyan, 2013).

As such, at the beginning of each interview I engaged in the epoche process by

setting aside my biases (Moustakas, 1994). During the interviews I bracketed my

personal experiences regarding known individuals participating in transitional andwork

release programs and my own professional human resources experiences. I did not make assumptions about the participants. As such, there was no discrepant evidence in the interviews I conducted. I did not negatively judge nor was I offended by any of the participants in terms of their appearance or language usage. I did not exert any power over them. I treated all participants with respect and in a non-threatening manner. Additionally, I presented myself in a professional, but casually dressed manner, to reduce any appearance of superiority.

Data Collection Procedures

I conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions with the selected participants of my study. This format allowed the participants to expand and elaborate on questions asked. By asking open-ended questions, participants were given ample time to share their viewpoints and describe their experiences both freely and extensively.

The following steps occurred when participants contacted me to express an interest in participating in my study:

- I explained the purpose of the study.

- The participants were informed of confidentiality and that there would be one audio recorded interview that would last no longer than one hour.

- The participants were informed they would receive a $20 gift card from a local retail establishment upon completion of the interview.

- When both the participant and I agreed they were qualified to participate in the study, an interview was scheduled at a local location, date and time convenient to the participant.

- At the beginning of the interview I reiterated the purpose of the study.

- Once the individual agreed to participate, I provided the consent form and obtained their signature.

- I answered any additional questions they had and then began the semi-structured interview using the interview protocol in Appendix B informing them that I will turn on the audio recorder. I added additional questions based on their responses to elicit more information to be able to give a full account of the participants' lived experiences in the work release program.

Debriefing Procedures

After the interview, I asked participants to share any concerns regarding the use of the information obtained. I reiterated if they felt they wanted to provide additional information that I was open to hearing what they have to share with me. I informed inform them that if I feel that I need to clarify what they said or need additional information I will contact them via text or a telephone. However, as anticipated, we only had the one interaction. None of the participants had any concerns or follow-up questions. They were happy to share their experiences. At the conclusion of the interview, I gave them the $20 gift card for their participation.

Data Analysis Plan

In qualitative research, data analysis can begin during the data collection process and may be modified even after the first collection of data (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure,& Chadwick, 2008). I conducted face-to-face interviews to address my two research questions by asking the questions found in Appendix A following the protocol found in Appendix B. For triangulation purposes, and in order to ensure a valid and credible study, it is important that I do not misrepresent responses from my participants. Therefore, all of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews were audio taped using a reliable recording device. I tested the device prior to all interviews and ensured I had back-up batteries readily available but I never had to replace the batteries. After I transcribed the data verbatim obtained from each interview I had two peer readers review my work to ensure I captured their responses accurately.

Software

My original plan was to utilize computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to organize my data. The CAQDAS I had selected was NVivo, a software package from QSR International (QSR International, n.d.). NVivo allows the researcher the ability to conduct quick searches; easily retrieve and manipulate data entered; and produce graphics displaying the data in a visual model (QSR International, n.d.). Even though there are many advantages of utilizing NVivo, I ended up hand coding my data and did not utilize a CAQDAS.

Analysis of Phenomenological Data

To analyze my data, I used a seven-step data analysis procedure formulated by Moustakas (1994). First, I employed *horizonalization.* After reading each transcription, I made preliminary groupings of participants' expressions that were relevant to their experience. Each participant's statements were given equal value during this step. In the second step, I employed *reduction and elimination*. In this step, each transcript was re-read and any statement that overlapped or was not relevant to the experience was eliminated. Moustakas refers to the remaining statements as invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). The third step involved *clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents*. The invariant constituents identified in the second step were labeled and clustered into themes about how participants experienced the lived experiences of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). The fourth step involved *final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application, validation*. The invariant constituents and themes are double-checked against each participant's transcript to ensure they are compatible or clearly reflected, leaving no room for doubt, otherwise they were deleted. *Construction of individual textual description* occurred in the fifth step. In this step, text was developed taking verbatim, statements participants shared during the interview describing their experience (Moustakas, 1994). This is where the participants described "what" they experienced (Moerer-Urdahl& Creswell, 2008). The sixth step involved *construction of individual structural description*. During this step, structural descriptions were developed based on "how" it was experienced. The *construction of a textual-structural description* occurred during the seventh step. Here individual textual

descriptions were combined with the structural descriptions to describe the meaning of the individuals' experience (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the individual textual-structural descriptions were pulled together to describe the meanings and essence of all the participants' experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

It is imperative that readers of a study are able to trust the findings and have confidence the study was conducted in an appropriate manner. There are several strategies recommended to researchers to ensure trustworthiness in studies conducted (Morse, 2015). It is important to ensure the results of the study are substantiated (Morse, 2015). One potential threat to internal validity is misinterpretation of responses from the interviews. I addressed this by recording and transcribing each interview verbatim. I did not assume, interpret or add any bias to participants' responses.

While member checking could prove beneficial, due to this vulnerable population and the potential to overwhelm them with multiple contacts, I did not call them back after I transcribed the data for member checking. However, I did ask for clarity during the interviews as necessary. Rather, the strategy I engaged in was to use peer reviewers versus member checking. The purpose of using a peer reviewer is to ensure the integrity of the coding process was maintained (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, &Murphy, 2013). I shared my findings with two disinterested parties to see if they came to the same conclusion to ensure my research was not clouded by my own bias.

Since as researcher I am part of the research instrument, I also engaged in reflexivity. During the study I maintained a brief reflective journal. This journal described how my personal interests led me to conduct this study. It described the justification for any decisions I made or challenges I encountered during the study (Houghton et al., 2013).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of an individual reading a study to be able to transfer the findings or extend the results of another researchers' study (Korstjens& Moser,2018; Morse, 2015). In qualitative research, it is incumbent on the individual reading the study to determine if the findings are transferable to another setting (Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Therefore, it is important the researcher of the original study provide thick descriptions, methods used, and presentations of results so that other researchers can decide on their own if the results are transferable (Houghton et al., 2013). In my study I provided rich descriptions to aid in transferability. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, my study may have limited transferability of the findings to other geographic locations with either lower or higher cost of living or jobs availability.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the reliability of the findings of the study (Morse, 2015). Essentially, can the same results be obtained if the study were repeated (Morse, 2015). The best way to achieve reliability is the use of an audit trail (Morse, 2015). While not required, a visual audit trail will show the steps the researcher has taken to ensure sound research has been conducted (Twycross, & Shields, 2005).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the researcher's ability to remain objective (Morse, 2015). This is ensuring the responses received during the interviews are the lived experiences of the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This was achieved by providing actual quotes from the participants in my study (Cope, 2014). I used bracketing and reflecting to assist in the confirmability of my study. As a result, the data obtained was directly from my participants and the recommendations and conclusions of my study are free from my personal bias.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical Considerations

This study involved human subjects. Due to the population I engaged with, I ensured the utmost confidentiality. As such, prior to conducting my research study, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) where they assigned my study # 02-02-18-0425603.

Before conducting the face-to-face semi-structured interviews, I verbally informed my participants that their participation is voluntary and they can withdraw at any time. I personalized an informed consent form to discuss the purpose of the study fully, the voluntary nature, any remuneration, and the procedure I would follow. Participants were assured their responses would not be associated with their personal identifying information on any documentation I keep when analyzing the data collected. As such, study participants were not harmed as their identity was protected.

Treatment of Human Participants

There was no physical harm to the participants. I recognized there would be time involved to obtain the data during interviews. Therefore, I respected each participant's schedule and did not overwhelm them with subsequent follow-up meetings. I minimized this by transcribing the interviews accurately and enlisted in peer readers to ensure accuracy. Additionally, since I value people, especially those most vulnerable, I was able to justify offering them a small $20 gift card as a thank you.

Treatment of Data

Throughout this study, confidentially was maintained to protect the participants. The names of the participants remained anonymous. The participants were informed that I would be the only one who has access to their identity. I used a numerical method to identify each participant in the study. As such, participant one is identified at P1, participant two is identified as P2 and so on. Other than signing the consent form, no other written material was required of participants.

If at any time during the recorded interview an individual chose to withdraw, I would have deleted the recording at that time so that there is no record of the interview. Fortunately, no one withdrew. Therefore, I addressed all ethical concerns regarding data collection for my study.

I maintain all data collected for my study in a fire-proof safe in accordance to Walden University's record keeping requirements. This includes notes taken, audio tapes, the actual tape recording device which was only used for this study, my reflective journal, data transcripts of the interviews, and any additional notes taken during this

study. This safe is in a safe location in my personal residence along with my laptop that was used to record and analyze the data.

In accordance with Walden University's ethical and record keeping policy, I will maintain all electronic and handwritten notes, files, transcripts, recruitment flyers, and any other data relating to this study for 5 years after completion. After the 5 year period, I will destroy all hard copy documents via a cross-cut shredding process. All electronic documents will be destroyed via a professional electronic media destruction and sanitation process.

Summary

In this chapter, I detailed the research methodology for my study. Specifically, the rationale for choosing a qualitative method for this study was provided. Participant selection and data collection procedures were described in detail. Additionally, the role of the researcher, including researcher bias is addressed along with a description of my data analysis procedure. To ensure trustworthiness of my study, I have addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, particularly since I was working with a potentially vulnerable population, ethical considerations were addressed to ensure my study met strict ethical guidelines.

In Chapter 4, the findings of this phenomenological research study are discussed. I also reintroduce the purpose of the study and restate the central research questions. I describe the setting, demographics of the participants, and procedures used for conducting interviews. Additionally, in Chapter 4 the process I used for collecting and

analyzing my data are described. Finally, I also provide evidence of trustworthiness,

concluding with study results and summary.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Chapter 4 begins with the purpose of my study and a review of my central

research questions. In this chapter I also describe the interview setting, demographics of

the five participants, and procedures I used for conducting the face-to-face interviews. I

expand upon the methods I used for collecting and analyzing my data. I also provide a

section on evidence of trustworthiness. Finally, I conclude with the results of my study

using quotes from the participants and provide a composite of the lived experiences. I

wrap up Chapter 4 with some observations from field notes taken and a summary.

Formerly incarcerated individuals are an idiosyncratic and growing part of the

workforce (Flatt & Jacobs, 2018; Yadoo, 2016). The focus of work release programs is

to help offenders find employment to increase their chance of success as they transition

back into community upon release (Duwe, 2015). Additionally, a goal while

participating in a work release program is to help address barriers offenders face while

seeking and maintaining employment prior to release (Rukus et al., 2016).

The purpose of my study was to understand and describe the unique experiences

of male ex-offenders previously assigned to a work release program in an urban setting in

an Atlantic East Coast state. The philosophy of this particular work release program as

described in a brochure is to help inmates assigned to the program transition back into the

community. The program permits individuals to maintain or seek new employment while

incarcerated so that they can be productive. The program also gives the inmate an

opportunity to continue to financially support family as necessary as well as receive

family support. Finally, the program allows for the ability to save money to meet other financial obligations.

In an effort to gain a fuller understanding of experiences of participants in the work release program, I conducted face-to face interviews with five former work release program participants. I asked them about their own personal experiences regarding employment just prior to entering the work release program, their experiences maintaining current or seeking new employment while in the work release program, and their experiences following the work release program. The intent was on learning what impact their participation in the work release program had on them in seeking and gaining sustainable employment. The goal was also to explore whether or not the programs offered, and their experiences made a difference in whether or not the participants were able to gain and then sustain employment upon reentering society after release.

Research Questions

To meet my research objectives, I developed the following central research questions that guided my study with the specific interview questions asked (see Appendix B):

Research Question 1: How do male ex-offenders describe their lived experiences while they participated in a work release program located in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state?

Research Question 2: How do male ex-offenders describe the impact oftheir participation in a work release program as they transition back into society?

Research Setting

All of the interviews were conducted in a safe environment where the participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. There were no personal or organizational conditions that influenced participants. I engaged in the epoche process to ensure an atmosphere free from bias and prejudgments. At the beginning of each interview, the participants received a copy of the consent form. This form also provided an overview of my study. As such, prior to the tape recording, I took about 5 minutes to read out loud, while they followed along, the description of my study and I explained again, the purpose of the study. I informed each participant that the interview would be tape recorded and transcribed. I asked and answered questions regarding the format and assured them that they could end the interview at any time and for any reason. Each participant was asked to sign the consent form.

All participants were eager to share their experiences and had no problem being audio recorded. Each participant was interviewed only once for less than 1 hour. None of the participants withdrew from the process. At the end of each interview, I verbally reiterated they could contact me if they had additional questions. I also thanked them for their time and providing valuable input to my study. Finally, at the conclusion of the interview, each participant was given a $20 gift card to a local gas/convenience store for their participation.

Demographics

No questions were asked regarding age, religion, or ethnic background as those demographics were not a focus of the study. The gender of all individuals interviewed

was male as the purpose was on interviewing adult male participants of the work release

program. Finally, to be in this specific work release program participants had to be adults

so that was also known with no additional need to verify. I did ask if they were employed

prior to incarceration and placement into the work release program.

Prior to being incarcerated, four of the five participants held some form of

employment as shown in Table 1. Only two of these participants were able to keep the

same position they held prior to incarceration.

Table 1

Held Job Prior to Incarceration

Participant	Yes	No
P1	X	
P2		X
P3	X	
P4	X	
P5	X	

Data Collection

I was able to locate five participants through my planned snowball method.

Participants were identified based on who had experienced the phenomenon that I was

researching. The phenomenon I was exploring was experiences of adult males who had previously participated in the local work release program. The data I collected included both the perceptions and feelings of phenomenon. After interviewing these individuals, it became apparent that saturation had been met.

I conducted one face-to-face semi-structured interview using open-ended questions with each of the selected participants of my study. This format allowed the participants to have an opportunity to be open and honest to expand and elaborate on questions asked. By asking open-ended questions, participants were afforded ample time to share their viewpoints and describe their experiences both freely and extensively. All of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews were taped using a reliable recording device. I tested the device prior to all interviews and ensured I had back-up batteries.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the interview protocol I developed comprised semi-structured initial questions with subsequent prompt questions that would allow me to elicit additional information as needed. I was intentional in developing questions that were open-ended. These questions were developed to draw out participants' perceptions of their everyday lived experiences while participating in the work release program. When conducting the face-to-face interviews, each participant was asked to share their feelings, opinions and experiences while participating in the work release program.

All participants were asked the same questions, however not always in the same order. Some individuals provided responses that addressed questions that were further down in the interview protocol. I engaged in back and forth dialogue and asked follow-up questions to gain a fuller understanding of each participants experience in the work

release program. As a result, not all were asked probing questions as they had already provided in-depth responses to the initial questions. There were no unusual circumstances encountered in my data collection.

Data Analysis

The first thing I did in the data analysis process was to prepare the information I collected through the one-on-one interviews. All of my interviews were transcribed using *Express Scribe Transcription* software. This software allowed me to actually transcribe the data myself. I was able to set the pace of the recording with ease to go back and forth while transcribing. A huge benefit of being able to personally transcribe the interviews allowed me to hear over and over again their responses. I could hear the tone in their voice and any pauses in their responses which allowed for deeper understanding of their lived experiences.

Data from all interviews were labeled with pseudonyms to protect the identity of each participant. As such, Participant 1 = P1; Participant 2 = P2; Participant 3 = P3; Participant 4 = P4 and Participant 5 = P5. The recording device, notes, printed draft documents and the computer I used to transcribe the interviews were kept in my personal safe when not in use.

My method of data analysis was based upon Moustakas' 7-Step data analysis method as described in Chapter 3. Being cognizant, I continued as I had done in the data collection process, to set aside any bias and prejudgments to achieve epoche and focus on the participants' personal experiences. I began my analysis by printing out and reading each transcribed interview several times. During one of my re-readings, I also listened

again to the audio recording to refresh my memory of how they expressed their feelings in the tone of their voice.

I started the analysis process by identifying specific statements and expressions that were relevant to each participants experience in the work release program during a process called horizonalization. During this process, each experience has equal value and each horizon grounds the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I reduced and eliminated any information that was repetitive, overlapped or was not relevant to the participants' personal experience (Moustakas, 1994). Some offered opinions and examples of what they heard about others experiences while they were in the work release program. While reviewing these statements, I ferreted out themes by key words. During the manual coding process, I used different color highlighters to make connections between themes. I double checked and clustered into themes, the lived experiences of the participants. Common themes were revealed and data saturation achieved. Four distinct themes emerged about how the participants experienced daily life and seeking employment while being an inmate in the work release program: (a) Lack of resources, (b) Need for outside support system, (c) Perception of lack of empathy from correctional officers and employers, and (d) Gratitude and appreciation to participate in the work release program.

After the thematic analysis, I identified the "what" participants experienced and "how" it was experienced. Finally, actual text of each individual responses were pulled together to describe the meanings and essence of all participants' experiences in the work release program. Throughout this process, epoche required me to set aside my

assumptions and biases so I could understand and describe each participant's experiences by avoiding preconceived opinions.

Discrepant Cases

Just because data do not fit neatly into a category, does not mean it is thrown out (Waite, 2011). Sometimes during data analysis we might identify a discrepant case. Discrepant cases are not a bad thing; in fact they may add or lead to more vigorous study (Waite, 2011). After analyzing the data in my research study I found no evidence of discrepant cases.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Recording my interviews so that I could use the participants' actual description of their experience bolstered credibility. I took the time to build trust with my participants so that I could fully understand their experiences as they described them to me. I restated various responses back to my participants and in some cases asked participants to clarify when necessary to ensure I understood their responses during the interview. To ensure credibility, I used two peer reviewers to review my transcription and interpretation of findings to ensure I was not clouded by my own bias. Using these peer reviewers helped to ensure the integrity of my coding process.

Transferability

The ability to transfer the findings or extend the results of another researchers' study is called transferability (Morse, 2015). By utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach and transcribing my interviews verbatim I was able to obtain

thick descriptions. In this manner I was able to describe the unique and common experiences of the participants while in the work release program. However, as noted in my limitations, because the study I conducted was a qualitative study in one specific work release program, the results may not be transferable.

Dependability

As noted in Chapter 3 an audit trail is the best way to ensure dependability. I have documented my research from the beginning of my study until the end where I report findings and make recommendations. As such, I was consistent in following the steps in utilizing the qualitative design method.

Confirmability

By utilizing the epoche process, I set aside my biases and judgment. During the entire study, I was aware of my own preconceptions and assumptions and ensured I bracketed any biases. Therefore, I remained neutral and was able to ensure the findings and recommendations are based upon the actual lived experiences of the participants of my study.

<div align="center">

Research Results

</div>

This study was undertaken to explore the actual lived experiences of participants in a work release program. After analyzing the data obtained from the questions listed my Interview Protocol (Appendix B), four major themes emerged. Results from my study suggested the importance of having a variety of resources, programs, and outside support available to work release program participants. Lack of resources was a challenge all faced while in the work release program. Understandably, participants

described being assigned to the work release program was better than being assigned to

general population in the adult detention center. However, more resources, programs,

and support to the participants may have provided a different experience. Additionally,

the results suggested that a more supportive approach versus a punitive approach could

influence a participants' employment while in the work release program and possible

sustainability upon release. The overall findings from my study indicated that the

characteristics described in Bronfenbrenner's EST framework had an influence on these

individuals experience in seeking employment while in the work release program.

Emergent Themes

The textural and structural descriptions generated from the interviews represent

the meaning and essence of the participants' experience in the work release program. As

noted in Figure 1, there were four major themes emerging from the interviews that are

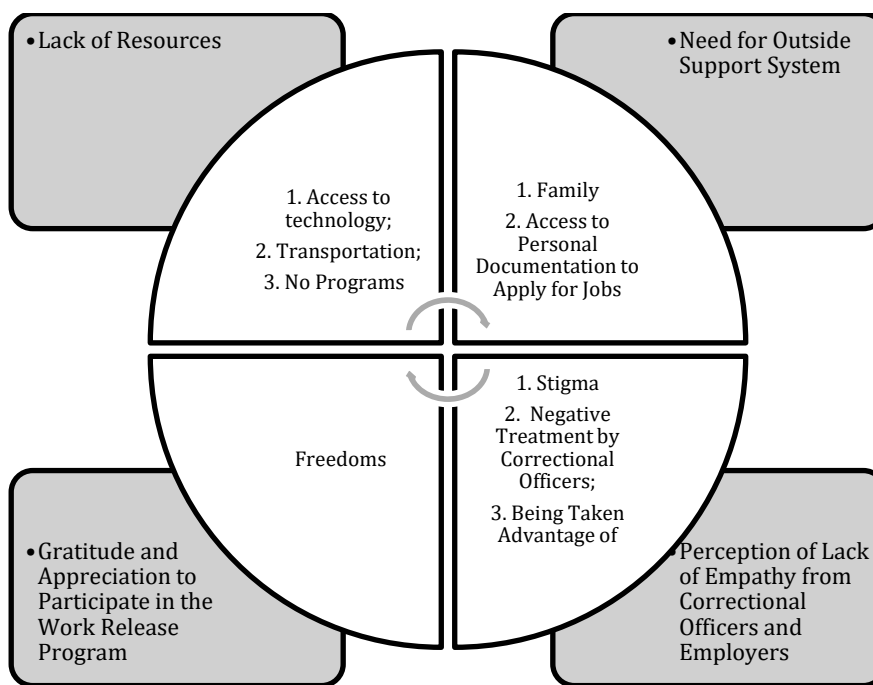described by participants' responses.

Lack of Resources

1. Access to technology;
2. Transportation;
3. No Programs

Need for Outside Support System

1. Family
2. Access to Personal Documentation to Apply for Jobs

Freedoms

1. Stigma
2. Negative Treatment by Correctional Officers;
3. Being Taken Advantage of

Gratitude and Appreciation to Participate in the Work Release Program

Perception of Lack of Empathy from Correctional Officers and Employers

Figure 1. Themes.

Theme 1: Lack of Resources

The work release program inmate handbook states several resources available for job searches. These include telephone books, newspaper classified ads and access to the public library upon request. In addition the handbook states that computer literacy training equipment is available. According to the participants interviewed, there was no access to a computer, nor did the work release program staff provide computer literacy training. In fact, the correction officers (CO's) at the work release program did not provide any job search program or strategies. As noted by P5 "there were nothing to help you actually seek employment". P2 shared "they don't help you get a job like they say they should or say they will."

Most employers require online applications. It is imperative to have access to technology to be able to apply for jobs. The work release program has one computer in

the office where the CO's sit that is not available to the participants for use. While work

release participants can have a cell phone in their outside locker, they must give the work

release main number to potential employers. This phone is also located in the CO's

office.

It is also essential to have access to transportation to be able to either apply or get

to and from a job once hired. The program does not provide for transportation to job

locations. What they did provide was a map to the nearest local library to use the

computers. While there was a local bus stop about half a mile from the work release

program, there was no public transportation to the library or jobs within about a two mile

radius of the work release building.

One reason for learning to have a streamline job search strategy is that each

participant was allowed out of the work release building for only two hours at a time to

look for a job. Depending on the individual, the library was a 30 minute, or 45-60 minute

roundtrip walk. As such, half the time allowed out was used up by walking. P2 shared

the following:"So, looking for a job, uh, they let you out 6 hours a day, two-hour

intervals, so you can go out but you gotta be back to check in every two hours. And you

gotta walk everywhere. You can't take a bus ride anywhere. You could have a bike if

you had people to bring it up there for you but it's a lot of work walking around with a

bike. Walking in and out of stores. Tryin' to apply. And most places are online so you

gotta go to the library most of the time."

When asked if computers were available to use once they got to the library most

agreed once at the library access to a computer was not an issue. P1 stated "Ya. I believe

there was like 8 or 10 maybe and they were always available. I mean they usually had about half of them free so." However, as P2 shared "they wouldn't even let you have a thumb drive in the building to have your resume loaded onto. Most of the applications would take longer than an hour so you'd have to come back and redo some of the applications cuz it wouldn't save 'em."

Once they did get a job, getting there was a challenge. P4 shared how he would take a bus from Manassas in the morning at 7:10. "I'd catch a connector over by the bus depot. I'd get to work about 9 o'clock and leave work at 10 til 5 to catch another bus. So from about 7 o'clock to 9 o'clock I was on a bus just trying to get to Woodbridge. So two hours for the most part was spent commuting and then 8 hours then 2 hours back there." P3 expressed the importance of transportation. If he had not been able to use his dad's car he would not have been able to keep his job prior to incarceration. P3 stated "you gotta have the means of transportation and where I worked in lieu of the work release program it was so far away I mean city transit would have taken a long time. Buses here or there or taxis would have been real expensive, I mean, how could you do it?" P2 had no means of transportation so was grateful his dad opened a "Lyft" account for him. He described the Lyft account as "a taxi service so that I can just pre-schedule the ride in the morning and schedule it when I get off work so I could be back to work release in time." P5 had no transportation and chose to walk to his place of employment which was just shy of an hour each way.

Theme 2: Need for Outside Support System

While seeking employment there is an old saying, "It's not what you know but who you know." Often employment opportunities depend on such connections. Not all participants had an outside family or friend support system in place to help them in securing employment. Those who did expressed great appreciation for having an outside support system in place to help them in seeking employment while in the work release program. They described that having a strong family support system in place helped to ensure their ability to gain employment. When applying for a position, it is also important to have proper personal identification, a resume or previous job information and proper interview or work attire. The participants with little or no family support expressed frustration in seeking employment.

When asked if P1 had an outside support network to help in seeking employment while participating in the work release program he replied "Not really. Cuz I don't really know too many people in the Manassas area." "I didn't have any friends or family that had any contacts in that area so that didn't really open up any doors in terms of being able to get some immediate employment." When asked about how he was able to complete applications with required information P1 stated "um, I had all committed to memory – driver's license, social security". However, since he did not have family in the immediate area I asked how he was able to provide proof of identity. P1 replied "I had my wife drive it over to the work release center." As such, while he did not have help in seeking employment or a support system in the immediate area, he admitted if he did not

have his wife (family) to bring over his documentation it would have been hard to get a job.

P2 expressed "ya, I had my parents. My mom was helping me fill out applications online and my dad was able to get in contact with an old friend and pastor that I ended up getting a job with". When asked how he was able to provide documentation to apply for jobs and proof of having a social security number, P1 replied "I had to reach back to family and friends to get it."

P3 already had a job working at a store that he was allowed to keep when he entered into the work release program. As such, when I asked about his support system he shared he was very appreciative of his outside support system. P3 stated his support system was "my family, my mom and dad. They have always been behind me, by my side." P3 went on to further describe his appreciation and the importance of having their support. "They would come and visit me and things like that and that's a really big deal even when guys are – you know, you've made a mistake in society and I'm not making excuses but you know you do something wrong and it's nice even still to have that touch you know even when you are incarcerated and you are serving your debt to society ya know."

Likewise, P4 also had a job he was able to keep when he entered the work release program. He worked for a local family business. Even though he expressed they did not get along he did share that his mom was a support to him. When asked the question of having a support system P4 stated "I mean I had my mom. And like we don't really get along all that well but ya know while I was in there she did everything she could to make

sure that I was….I was comfortable as I could be". "Ya know that was the most support that I got was from my mom."

P5 shared he did not have any outside support system at all. He didn't have any work clothes or access to clothes. He explained that while he had memorized his social security number, in order to complete the application process and get a job, you need your social security card as proof. He went on to describe that the CO's were not supportive. Since he had lived only with his daughter when he was arrested, all of his belongings were thrown out. It took him a while, but he was finally able to research and found he could apply for a social security card online and have it delivered to the work release building. P5 stated "I had, I had to go through a bunch of procedures. I had to talk to the lieutenant at first because the original CO's they, they really wasn't lettin' me they just kept tellin' me find a ride and go to the DMV but I kept stressing to them that I don't have, that I didn't have anybody in Virginia." When I asked to describe how this made him feel overall P5 said "it was hard at first, it was hard, it was frustrating but determination…". This leads to the third theme that emerged from the interviews, negativity from not only some employers but also the correctional officers in charge. P2 expressed "a lot of COs just pick and choose their favorites." Inmates who have COs that take the time to engage with them and strive to motivate them fare better in their effort to reintegrate (Schlager, 2018).

Theme 3: Perception of Lack of Empathy from Correctional Officers and Employers

Once assigned to the work release program all participants were told they had two weeks to locate a job. The position must be full-time (30 hours or more per week). The handbook states no temporary, part-time or jobs paying commission would be allowed. All participants described the stress they underwent having these employment seeking conditions. While there is not much data on the length of the hiring process (USA Today, 2016), Amy Glaser, senior vice president of Adecco staffing as cited in USA Today (2016) states:

> For some temporary and low- to midlevel jobs, such as warehouse workers, forklift operators and call center representatives, many firms are interviewing two or three applicants instead of a typical three to five, says. Others are requiring fewer rounds of interviews or eliminating skills or personality assessments. The average timetable from first interview to job offer has been cut from two or three weeks to five to 10 days. (p. 1)

Still, finding a job under pressure can be difficult especially for someone with a criminal record. The COs took advantage of this as well as some of the employers. P2 expressed that:"the COs there definitely should be trained better – I feel like they push you closer to just going off on them cause they want people to – it seems like they want people to fail in the program." P5 stated "and not just the, um inmate, it's sometimes – a lot of times, the correctional officer that creates problems with the job with work release inmates." Additionally, threats of being sent back to general population were being

placed on the participants by the correctional officers (COs). P4 expressed "it's like walking on eggshells." "It's like any little thing that you do, it could just – it could send you back to jail." Likewise, P3 stated "the officers would not let anything slide." P4 further stated "They have a god complex and they know they can lord that over you." "It's just that you know, they are the judge, jury, and the executioner in there." When CO's come across as authoritative or militant, it is difficult for the inmate to achieve buy-in and trust (Schlager, 2018).

The former work release participants also expressed there was a stigma of having a criminal background when interviewing for jobs. P1 shared: "I mean uh you'd have them talking to you and then as soon as they asked about my criminal background they no longer seemed interested." Or they'd say they'd get back to you and then you just never hear anything again so definitely shut a lot of doors." Likewise, P5 stated "yea, actually a lot of places wouldn't hire me cause of my background…and I've never been in trouble as a juvenile or even anything. I don't think they can do that but they still wouldn't even hire me for my background." P2 shared that he had heard a lot of stories about "employers mistreating their employees because they know they work in work release."

Another requirement when seeking employment was the inmate had to provide proof that they had actually talked with employers or completed an application. P5 shared the following when going to an actual employer: "You have to bring paperwork in and get it – company's name, signed, and location and the phone number and also their signature for every place you go in and ask for employment or application." When asked

how he felt about having to ask the manager to sign, P5 stated: "uh at first it was kind of like – like, it's not demeaning but it was kinda embarrassing because once certain employers, I mean I get it, everybody you know goes through a hard time in life but once certain employers know you are incarcerated or you are technically in trouble at the moment, they may not be comfortable hiring you as an employee." P5 further stated "half the places wouldn't even sign the paper cuz I guess they had some type of experience already with work release'. P2 stated "a lot of places either, ah, didn't want to sign it or signed it and like, I don't know…they kinda just looked at you funny like they definitely don't want to hire somebody they gotta keep all these tabs on. That's just a bunch of extra work for them."

Even though P4 had a job when he was assigned to the work release program, he was still required to look for a job. This was a policy was a waiting period to ensure they did not test positive for any drug usage. So for two weeks, he was required to look for a job and provide proof he did before he was allowed to return to his current employer. P4 also expressed the limitations the others indicated in being able to find a job. He shared: "They would let you outside to go look for a job from like from 9 to 3 but you have to check in like every hour like go back to the building so it was like you didn't actually have time to really even look for a job." P1 stated: "they're pretty stiff on you having to be back at a certain time." Once P1 came back a few minutes late and was not allowed back out for the rest of the day.

P2 explained that his understanding of the work release program "is supposed to help you get a job, supposed to help you transition back into society but they don't focus

on that; they focus more on disciplining you." As noted by Schlager (2018), an effective CO will empower the inmate to be motivated to meet their goals.

Theme 4: Gratitude and Appreciation to Participate in Work Release Program

Interestingly, despite the issues stated above, all but one of the participants expressed gratitude and appreciation of being allowed to participate in the work release program. Notably, the appreciation was not because of the purpose of finding a while incarcerated that they could continue after release. Many appreciated it because being able to participate in the work release program offered much more freedoms than being incarcerated in the Adult Detention Center. P1 stated "…wasn't particularly a fan of the job that I had or the pay that I was getting but looking back on it I mean, like I said, it's better than not getting anything or not having access to it so…". P5 shared: "you kinda have a little bit of freedom like I guess if you smoke cigarettes you can smoke cigarettes and things like that." When asked P1 what his overall feeling about being in work release was he expressed "ah, I mean, you're still incarcerated but I mean all in all, I would have rather been in there than being in the main Adult Detention Center. You have the opportunity to leave. You get to work; you get to make money send money back to your family." Likewise, P3 had the same feelings of gratitude. P3 stated: "it was definitely a gift, I mean, I felt very blessed to have it. I felt grateful to have it, I mean it was a very hard time in my life…it was not a fun time and uh there was a lot going on…I was going through a lot of stuff and now that I look back..I mean how could you not be grateful for that?"

Composite Description of the Lived Experience

The common themes that emerged answered my two research questions. While all participants expressed gratitude of the opportunity to participate in the work release program, they did not feel participating in the program had any major impact upon transitioning back into society after release. Of the three who gained new employment while participating in the work release program only one of them kept the same job after release. However, even this individual, P5, at the time of the research study interview, said he was not able to continue to keep his job because he lacked transportation. While in the work release program he walked to his job, albeit it a long walk. When he was released, however, he moved back home to another county and could no longer get to his job.

Overall, the participants expressed that their experiences in the program did not provide for any job search assistance. There was no computer access to apply for a job nor was there any resume or skill building training offered. P1 sums it up "they really don't give you any sort of assistance in terms of who's hiring, where to go. They don't ask you what your skills are. They don't really point you in the right direction at all. Sort of a free for all." For those needing identification for employment verification, there was no coordination with the Division of Motor Vehicles to assist them in getting identification. Likewise, there was little coordination with local employers to get job placement referrals for participants.

All the participants had challenges with transportation. Since there was no job referral and no computer access at the work release location, all the participants had to

walk to local employers just to see if there were any openings. Not only that, they also

had to walk to the local library to apply online for a job. Combined with these challenges

to locate employment, the participants also felt the stigma of having a criminal record

with some of the employers. When they were hired, they felt that employers took

advantage of the fact that they were work release participants. P1 shared that he found

out after talking with other employees that "they were getting paid a couple more dollars

an hour than we were. Kinda felt that we were being taken advantage of cause we were in

the work release." P1 also shared he felt because of his participation in the work release

program "they give us less desirable jobs than the other people."

Likewise, the participants perceived that the CO's treated them with disrespect.

Participants constantly experienced perceived threats of being returned to the ADC

because they felt the CO's held power over them while in the program. When asked if

they had anything else they would like to share, P1 stated: "I just think they need to be a

little bit more fair in terms of the amount of time they allot to people to go out and find

jobs. I think they could be a little bit more helpful if you were to give them your

background on things. So they could possibly point you in the direction in terms of

who's hiring, where to go."

It was clear that those who had family support fared better than those who did not

have an outside support network. P5 sums it up "It took me longer to get ID, social

security card, everything. I didn't have clothes for interviews." He shared that he had to

break the rules to get a basic job necessities. Once he had a job, he ordered a cell phone

online and had it sent to his place of employment. He stated "I had to – the things I did,

like the clothes and stuff I actually did get in there, I probably – if they would have found

out, at the time I was getting um, I probably would have been kicked out of the program

just for trying to better myself."

Observation from Field Notes

While interviewing the participants, I did not take a lot of notes. I wanted to be

fully attentive and listening to understand their lived experiences. However, I recognize

field notes are important to capture tone of voice, nonverbal cues, current disposition or

physical characteristic, so I did capture some notes immediately following the interviews

as to their overall disposition for further reflection at a later point in time.

All of the participants were alert and happy to be of help in my study. Four of the

five were extremely polite saying thank you and yes 'ma'am. P3, while willing to

participate, appeared to be skeptical at first. Early in the interview when asked a question

he said "Honestly?" I replied, "Honesty is what I want to hear". By reassuring him and

using the epoche process, my biases and judgment set aside, this approach made him

more comfortable and for the duration of the interview he was open and freely used

profanity throughout our time together. P3 paused and reflected a lot to express his

extreme gratitude for the opportunity to be a participant in the work release program.

All appeared to have some disdain for the correctional officers. Both P2 and P3 at times

would get riled up recounting some of their experiences in the work release program

dealing with the correctional officers.

Summary

In Chapter 4 I presented the key findings of my study illustrated in the four themes that emerged from my research. Findings were recounted through the collective experiences of the five participants interviewed. The four themes that emerged included: (a) Lack of Resources, (b) Need for Outside Support System, (c) Perception of Lack of Empathy from Correctional Officers and Employers, and (d) Gratitude and Appreciation to Participate in the Work Release Program.

While my research study was limited in scope with only five participants at a local work release program, the data suggest strong correlations in their shared experiences. The results revealed that participating in the work release program had little impact on gaining and sustaining that same employment post-release. The findings and results provide the foundation for the recommendations suggested in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 5 I reiterate the purpose and nature of the study. In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of my study's findings, limitations, and recommendations for further research. I will also discuss social implications for policies and practices and close with a conclusion of my study.

Chapter 5:Discussions, Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

As mentioned previously, individuals who have been incarcerated tend to have more difficulty not only in obtaining but also in maintaining sustainable employment. Across the country there are a variety of reentry programs available such as work release programs, halfway houses, and faith-based programs. These programs offer varying services to assist current or formerly incarcerated individuals in gaining skills and employment to help them transition back into society and reduce recidivism. Many of these individuals are also dealing with alcohol and drug addiction. As well, some have mental health issues. While there are many programs, research has found significant variation in the effectiveness among these programs (Berghuis, 2018; Duwe, 2015; Schmitt & Warner, 2011). Most research studies focus only on whether or not the participant has recidivated (Berghuis, 2018; Duwe, 2015).

It is vital for formerly incarcerated individuals to be able to transition back into the community with sustainable employment that would not only provide a livable wage to meet day to day living but also provide benefits such as health insurance. Despite numerous studies, few qualitative studies addressing outcomes of participation in a work release program have been published. As such, this phenomenological study was designed to explore the perspectives of individuals who actually participated in a work release program, their lived experiences, and how those experiences impacted their ability to gain employment while incarcerated and maintain the same employment or gain new employment upon reentry into society after release.

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the unique experiences of male ex-offenders previously assigned to a work release program in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state. I asked participants about their own experiences just prior to entering the work release program; their experiences while in the work release program; and their experiences following the work release program. The intent was on learning what impact participation in the work release program had on them in seeking and gaining employment. The goal was also to explore whether or not the experiences and programs offered made a difference in whether or not the participants were able to sustain employment upon reentering society after release.

I conducted this study using the transcendental phenomenological approach. I chose this approach because I wanted to learn about and describe the lived experiences of individuals who participated in a work release program. Most research I found on programs that provided a variety of transition services for individuals returning to society after incarceration tended to be quantitative research focused. I found very little in terms of qualitative studies, especially for male participants.

The goal of my study was to provide rich, in-depth descriptions of work release participants' experiences. I wanted to learn from the actual participants' perspectives regarding their lived experiences in the work release program. Using the transcendental phenomenological process, any preconceived assumptions and personal biases I had were set aside. By doing so, this allowed me to gain an understanding of each participants experience in the work release program with intentionality. The following research

questions were posed: (a) How do male ex-offenders describe their lived experiences while they participated in a work release program located in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state, and (b) How do male ex-offenders describe the impact of their participation in a work release program as they transition back into society?

The results of my study might help work release program policy makers revisit existing programs. They may revamp or modify programs that are specific to meet the unique needs of those individuals seeking sustainable employment prior to being released back into society after incarceration. They might add job-readiness programs that focus on interview strategies, resume writing, or how to apply for jobs online. Additionally, special attention may be given to forging a working relationship with employers in the local hiring area. This could prove beneficial by developing a long-term relationship with the work release program to assist in hiring work release inmates. It is my hope that my study findings will bring about social change through updates to existing work release policy and program planning.

Interpretation of Findings

I conducted this study to address gaps in the literature regarding the actual lived experiences of participants in a work release program. Since the participants are the actual beneficiaries of the program, it was important for me to find out how their needs were being met in an effort to both secure and maintain employment so they can be productive members of society upon release. Overall, the findings from my study supported the literature discussed in Chapter 2 from the participants' perspective.

The 5 adult male participants shared their daily living and employment search experiences while assigned to the work release program and how their employment experiences were immediately following release. They shared their challenges and barriers while in the work release program especially as it related to lack of resources and support to secure sustainable employment.

While there are a variety of reentry programs throughout the United States and abroad, this study was limited to one in an Atlantic East Coast state. As such, the results of the study may not fully capture the actual lived experience of all offenders who participate in some kind of reentry program.

The 5 individuals I interviewed described their actual experiences trying to find and a job while in the work release program as challenging. This was especially evident in terms of not having resources to ensure success. The lack of resources made it difficult for participants while seeking employment.

The individuals interviewed shared that they were not afforded employment-related training. Some of them mentioned that there were programs such as Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, and bible studies that they could attend voluntarily if they were not working. This is in contrast to the TRAILS program in New Hampshire that actually required participants to complete 250 hours of programming (Cohen, 2017).

All of my study participants said there were no sessions, training or otherwise on how to search and apply for job opportunities or how to interview for a job. There was no computer access onsite or computer-skills training available. This is also in contrast to the study conducted by Cantora (2015) were the researcher described a robust support

system including the fact that the participants were assigned an employment counselor. Participants of her study were also allowed access to a computer on premises (Cantora, 2015). In addition, in her study the female participants were required to take educational or mental health programs as necessary (Cantora, 2015).

Transportation was also lacking for the participants of my study. Once a job is secured, the ability to get to the employment location is critical. As P2 stated "you gotta walk everywhere. You can't take a bus ride anywhere." No resources were provided to the participants in my study for transportation. Unlike in the study conducted by Cantora (2015), the female participants were given bus tokens to ensure they had access to employment. While they could have a bike or car if they had a valid license and car insurance, no other transportation assistance was afforded to the participants in my study.

Reentry back into society should begin when the individual is incarcerated (National Criminal Justice Association, 2015). It was evident from the responses and disposition of the individuals I interviewed that having some sort of family or friend support, and ability to access resources, were of major concern to the success of gaining employment for participants of the work release program. Likewise, findings from the quantitative study conducted by Mown and Fisher (2015) revealed those who had positive social bonds with family members were more successful in gaining employment.

Prior to release, coordination should occur between local government, community services and faith-based organizations in the inmates' local community (National Criminal Justice Association, 2015). The study conducted by Richmond (2014) described

the prison industries program that provided opportunities while incarcerated, to gain vocational training and work experience.

The findings in my study that struck me even more was the participants' perception of the attitude of the correctional officers and employers towards them. In order to have a successful program, there must be a sincere willingness to help the inmates. Using the information gained from my study as well as taking note of some of the requirements in the recently signed law, the FIRST STEP Act, applicable at the Federal level, may also inform policy makers at the local level. By doing so, the CO's and staff assigned to the work release program at the Atlantic East Coast State facility could make a huge difference in the participants ability to gain and sustain employment upon release from the program. The overarching goal of the FIRST STEP Act is to reduce recidivism (S. 3747, 2018; White House, 2018). As relates to my study, it additionally, recommends instituting programs to help inmates with employment opportunities (S. 3747). More importantly, it also specifically provides for initial, periodic training and continual education for the Bureau of Prisons correctional officers and employees (S. 3747). Using the results of my study, parts of this model, and having a mindset to help inmates gain and sustain employment, would be very beneficial to the employees and CO's of the local work release program. As P4 expressed, "I just wish they would treat you like a decent human being."

Additionally, the participants perceived a lack of empathy from employers. They faced challenges in getting hired because employers were not welcoming to those who were incarcerated. This was consistent with the literature. A criminal background can

have a negative effect on obtaining employment (Jung, 2015; Schmitt & Warner, 2011).

Even those companies whose managers were willing to take a chance on the work release

participants were required to deny employment after a background check was completed.

This is consistent with the literature that many formerly incarcerated individuals face

barriers in obtaining successful employment (Denver et al., 2018; Cantora, 2015; Yadoo,

2016). Notably, if companies do not hire those with a criminal background, they may be

missing out on talent (Yadoo, 2016). Many companies including Wal-Mart, have joined

the BTB campaign and focus first on skills an individual can bring to the position

(Yadoo, 2016). However, that does not always guarantee a job offer as one of the

participants found out. P2 shared he had had interviews at Wal-Mart. P2 stated "I had

two or three interviews at two different Wal-Marts and they wouldn't hire me because of

my background." This finding is consistent with findings of Denver et al.(2018) where

delaying the background investigation only added to the hiring process requiring

managers to re-start the hiring process if a criminal background prevented them from

hiring their desired applicant.

Notably, MOD, a pizza company founded in 2008 supports a new concept called

Impact Hiring (Carter, 2018). Impact hiring focuses on giving employment opportunities

to those who were formerly incarcerated, are drug addicts, homeless and those who are

mentally challenged (Carter, 2018). The goal of this business is to build a foundation that

not only believes in impact hiring but also desires to make positive a social impact

(Carter, 2018). I would recommend based on the results of this study, that the work

release program and local employers be a part of a coordinated effort to employ formerly incarcerated individuals.

Consistent with the findings in the study conducted by Richmond (2014), the participants in my study appreciated the opportunity to be assigned to the work release program primarily because it was better than being incarcerated. Likewise, the findings found in the qualitative study conducted by Cantora (2015) revealed the female participants also appreciated the work release opportunity over incarceration. Finally, consistent with the study conducted by Cantora (2015), the individuals in my study did not maintain the same employment found in the work release program suggesting the actual program did not have a major impact on gaining and sustaining employment.

Limitations of the Study

The following were limitations of my study:

- As a qualitative study, the findings are not generalizable,

- Only interviewed participants from one Work Release Program,

- Only adult male individuals were interviewed,

- Small number of participants interviewed.

Adult female work release participants from the work release program were excluded from this study. The inclusion of female participants may elicit a greater understanding of lived experiences as it relates to the work release program's opportunities for gaining sustainable employment. As such, exclusion of this group of individuals may limit the transferability of the data.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the limitations of conducting my research at one work release program in an Atlantic East Coast state, further research could be conducted to address this limitation. Further research could also examine the lived experiences of both males and female work release participants in a variety of work release programs throughout the state as well as the country in areas of higher and lower cost of living and availability of transportation and employment opportunities. A more diverse sample of work release participants may reveal additional experiences that were not uncovered in this study. Additionally, further research could employ a more comprehensive research design such as a longitudinal research design method.

A goal should be to focus on the success of gaining, while participating in the work release program and then sustaining employment upon release, for the individual, not to tear them down because they messed up in life making a poor decision. Therefore, another recommendation for future research would be to interview correctional officers at the work release center as well as local employers. A qualitative study with correctional officers and employers may advance the understanding the of the purpose of the work release program and the benefits of working together to assist the work release participant in gaining and sustaining employment. It would be beneficial to interview the correctional officers and local employers in the area to gain their perspective of the goals for the work release program. Further research should be conducted that focuses on evaluating work release programs. Another recommendation would be to coordinate with other organizations. Cooperative Agreements from the Federal Government should be

awarded so federal staff with expertise from the Departments of Education, Justice, and Labor can conduct research collaboratively on work release program design and implementation with local government, human service organizations and businesses.

Implication for Positive Social Change

Bronfenbrenner's EST was used as the theoretical framework in developing the questions that participants were asked during the interview process. Applying EST was used as a lens to understand how factors in a offender's life influences other parts of their transition back into society after going through the work release program. This model may provide policy makers, correctional officers and employers with an enlightened understanding of the contextual factors impacting participants in the work release program. As such, it may lead to program and policy changes.

Some specific recommendations for practice would include restructuring the work release program where access to job aids and a partnership with local businesses and the employment center could be beneficial to the participants of the work release program. Additionally, upon entry into the program if a family or friend support system is available, an orientation could be implemented with all present to learn of the needs of the incarcerated to ensure the best possible success. Previous research has shown that family support while incarcerated leads to better success upon release (White House, 2015). Further consideration should be given to training or retraining correctional officers who are assigned to the work release center. Previous research has shown collaboration between the CO and the inmate leads to pro-social behavior (Schlager, 2018). As such, these recommendations, if implemented, have the potential to impact

positive social change at all levels to include the individual inmate, their family members, and society as a whole.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to study the lived experiences of male participants of a local work release program. My research study gave voice to five participants and contributes to the understanding of their lived experiences in the program. This study was conducted to address the gap in the literature regarding the perspective of those who are actual participants of work release programs. My research study also adds to the current literature on the lived experiences of adult male participants in a work release reentry program while incarcerated.

Using Bronfenbrenner's EST, I was able to obtain a more holistic picture of the individuals I interviewed and how each system may have influenced their lives once they entered the work release program. One reason to use the EST was to pinpoint successful experiences in one system and apply it to systems where individuals struggle (Orrock & Clark, 2015). I used EST as a framework to develop open-ended interview questions to elucidate what various experiences as well as support systems shaped the individuals. Once these areas were identified, the theoretical framework was used to anticipate what would be the individuals' most successful approach to transitioning back into society.

Using Bronfenbrenner's EST, I was able to gain knowledge in my study to inform policy and programmatic decision-making. Both policy and program makers need to be aware of the interconnection between the work release participants, their need for

resources, and positive relationships with both the CO's and employers in order to develop and ensure a successful program.

Change begins with listening and understanding each other. The individuals in my study gave voice and provided valuable insight into the importance of a robust and comprehensive support system. Support in terms of a variety of resources being available to them along with human interaction and advocacy on their behalf. Providing these insights to policymakers and those in the business of criminal justice reform can impart knowledge as to how the lack of resources and support negatively affect the offenders' ability to gaining employment while in the program that is sustainable upon reentry.

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Appendix A:Alignment of Interview Questions to Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do male ex-offenders describe their lived experiences while they participated in a work release program located in an urban setting in an Atlantic East Coast state?

Interview Questions:

1. How did you find out about the work release program?

2. Describe for me what a typical day – week – was like while in the work release program.

3. Tell me about your experiences in seeking employment while assigned to the work release program.

4. Tell me about any instances where you felt your criminal background prevented you from being hired while seeking employment while in the work release program.

5. What type of outside support network did you have while participating in the work release program?

6. Once employed, how did you handle transportation to and from your place of employment?

7. Tell me what employer paid benefits such as health insurance, were a priority for you while in the work release program.

Research Question 2: How do male ex-offenders describe the impact of their

participation in a work release program as they transition back into society?

Interview Questions:

1. What is your overall opinion about participating in the Work Release program?

   How did that participation impact our life? Your work?

2. If you did not keep the same job you got in the Work Release program upon

   release from jail what did you do?

3. Tell me about your employment history since you left the work release program.

4. What other programs or services where you offered as a participant in the work

   release program?

5. In your opinion, what about the work release program worked and what did not?

6. Describe the impact of your participation in the work release program on your

   transitioning out of jail. What difference did the program make for you?

7. What else do you want to tell me about the work release program?

Appendix B:Interview Protocol

Introductory Statement:

I would like to take a moment to thank you for agreeing to take part in my study. The interview will be audio-taped and then transcribed so that I can focus on listening to your story and experiences. All of your responses will be confidential. Do you have any questions regarding this format? Please know that at any time during this interview if you need a break or want to end it you are free to do so. Are there any questions before we begin? With your permission I will start the recording now and begin the interview.

Interview Questions:

1. How did you find out about the work release program?

2. Describe for me what a typical day – week – was like while in the work release program.

3. Tell me about your experiences in seeking employment while assigned to the work release program.

4. Tell me about any instances where you felt your criminal background prevented you from being hired while seeking employment while in the work release program?

5. What type of outside support network did you have while participating in the work release program?

6. Once employed, how did you handle transportation to and from your place of employment?

7. Tell me what employer paid benefits such as health insurance, were a priority for you while in the work release program.

8. What is your overall opinion about participating in the Work Release program? How did that participation impact our life? Your work?

9. If you did not keep the same job you got in the Work Release program upon release from jail what did you do?

10. Tell me about your employment history since you left the work release program.

11. What other programs or services where you offered as a participant in the work release program?

12. In your opinion, what about the work release program worked and what did not?

13. Describe the impact of your participation in the work release program on your transitioning out of jail. What difference did the program make for you?

14. What else do you want to tell me about the work release program?

Closing Comments:

Once again, I would like to thank you for taking part in my research study. Providing me with your lived experiences while in the work release program along with the other participants' experiences may bring to light to those officials in charge of the work release program valuable information in terms of any changes, improvements or continued benefits the work release program provides. It may also inform policy makers of the need to expand the offering to others who are faced with jail sentences greater than three months. I am grateful for your trust and as soon as I am able I will provide you with

a summary of the results if you would like for your personal records. Thank you this

concludes the interview. I am turning off the recording device.