

2020

## Understanding Community Members' Perception of Opioid Treatment Programs for Women in Westchester County

Erika Jean Pichardo  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Erika Jean Pichardo

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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Understanding Community Members' Perception of  
Opioid Treatment Programs for Women in Westchester County  
by

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MA, St. John's University, NY, 2017

BA, College of Mount Saint Vincent, 2016

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Criminal Justice

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## Abstract

Research shows a significant rise in opioid abuse that has led to an opioid epidemic. Although research has shown the importance and effectiveness of treatment programs for opioid users, there is a lack of research on understanding community members' perception and role of such programs and their perception of women who are opioid abusers and enter programs. The purpose of this study was to understand community members' perception of opioid treatment programs for women in New York State's Westchester County, using the theoretical framework of Becker's social labeling theory. The study employed a phenomenological design using interviews. Results of the 20 interviews indicated that participants were: (a) aware of treatment programs but did not know how effective they were at reducing addiction, crime, or death; and (b) were unsure if there was a difference between men and women with opioid abuse and dependency (other than the biological differences). All participants indicated that they did not have a role in these treatment programs but believed that they should have a role. Participants reflected on the need to reduce stigma associated with opioid abuse and treatment through education and awareness. Implications for social change include policy makers, legislators, and criminal justice professionals updating policies and educational modules to include community members in the process, as stakeholders, to reduce overall dependency and improve reintegration into society for opioid users.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this accomplishment to my mentor and confidant, Dr. Alfred D'Anca. Since beginning my undergraduate career, you have helped paved the way for me to advance myself and to appreciate all the small steps, milestones, and drawbacks along the way. Since the beginning, you believed in me and always made time in your busy day to advise me on my next steps. I appreciate that I have someone in my life to look up to and I owe it all to you for fostering my love of criminal justice, higher education, and more importantly, giving back and helping others. Thank you for believing in me, being my sounding board for my many, many ideas, and pushing me to never give up even when it got tough. I will forever be appreciative that I was given you as my mentor and hope this makes you proud. Thank you for everything, and I want you to know that, because of you, I made it.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Recently, studies have shown there has been a significant rise in opioid dependency and abuse, so much so that it has been coined the “opioid epidemic” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). This epidemic affects individuals, families, and policies nationwide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). More attention has now been placed on opioid abuse and dependency in terms of prevention, education, treatment, and policies (NY Senate, 2016). One of most common forms of prevention are treatment programs. More recently, additional treatment programs have been created to help with recovery and the overall reduction of the epidemic (Department of Health, n.d.). Although it is a national dilemma, there was a specific need to understand the abuse in Westchester County, New York.

Despite all the research that has been done to understand the opioid epidemic, research on the perceptions of community members was lacking. The ineffective nature of the treatment programs for opioid abuse stemmed from community members’ minimal understanding of the nature of opioid abuse, how treatment programs were deemed effective, and the role that community members themselves played in the recovery process. This phenomenological study used the published literature to demonstrate the extensive evidence about effective treatment programs and what users themselves deemed necessary and important in the recovery process. The literature was also used to describe gender disparities between men and women with respect to opioid abuse and treatment. This indicated the essential need to understand opioid treatment programs for

women. In demonstrating the evidence for opioid treatment programs, it was clear that there was a lack of data and research on how community members understood and perceived the central nature of an opioid abuse treatment program, how they viewed women who were opioid abusers and entering programs, and their own role within the successful reintegration of an opioid abuser.

This study was crucial to the policymakers to better assess and organize opioid treatment programs that benefit the users and community members alike. Community members play a vital role in the successful reintegration of opioid users, and as such, should have an understanding along with how that role works in conjunction with the treatment programs. This is an area where more research could prove beneficial and decrease the epidemic. Understanding community members' perceptions about opioid abuse treatment programs could ultimately lead to a better system for ending the rising abuse and dependency within Westchester County.

### **Background of the Study**

While opioids have been around for many decades, the opioid epidemic did not begin until around the 1990s. As pharmaceutical companies assured the public that opioids did not have addictive properties, the prescription rates rose and so did the rates of misuse at 11.4 million (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017) and, ultimately, dependency. The rise in illegal opioid use, such as heroin, did not stay behind with a reported 886,000 uses (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). This led to the opioid epidemic and to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2017) declaring a public health emergency. These rising numbers of the opioid

epidemic are alarming and indicated the need for more research. They demonstrate the damage that opioid misuse, abuse, and dependency can cause. They also suggest the need for more research in areas that are lacking, such as understanding the perceptions of community members.

New York State, specifically Westchester County, had noted the increase in opioid abuse at 8.7% since 2015 with a steady increase each year. This rate was especially true of women between the ages of 20 and 29 (Department of Health, n.d.; NYS Health Foundation, 2017; Project Worth, n.d.). Those who suffered from opioid abuse could enter prevention treatment programs, which proved effective; however, there was still a continual rise in abuse, regardless of the resources available to reduce the abuse and overall dependency (Drug Policy, 2020). There was not much substantive research done within this category of understanding community members' perceptions nationwide and even more so in Westchester County, New York (Department of Health, 2017).

### **Problem Statement**

Opioid use in Westchester County by women between the ages of 20 and 29 increased 8.7% since 2015; this was higher than any other age groups of either men or women (Department of Health, n.d. NYS Health Foundation, 2017). This rise resulted in higher rates of crime, death, and a decline in community social support for women (NYS Health Foundation, 2017). Currently, there are substance abuse treatment programs to address the growing rates of opioid use in women. However, even with these programs, the NYS Health Foundation stated that the number of deaths in men and women

associated with prescription opioids has nearly doubled in Westchester County since 2009 (2017). This problem of opioid use by women in Westchester County impacted individuals and the community because it limited the success of rehabilitation, reintegration, and, in general, the available resources of these treatment programs for opioid abusers. Many factors could have contributed to the increase in opioid abuse, among which were an increase in accessibility of prescription opioid drugs, the misuse of all forms of opioids, the lack of community support of such treatment programs, and an overall lack of understanding of opioid drugs and treatment programs.

Others have investigated this problem by focusing on required interpersonal support, participants' perception of treatment programs, and effective programming (Brown et al., 2015; Booth et al., 2014; Del Bocca et al., 2017), but none examined how the increase in opioid abuse by young women in Westchester County was viewed by community members. A community member was defined as an individual who resided within a region of Westchester County regardless of race, nationality, or sex. This study was expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing information on how community members perceived opioid abusers and opioid treatment programs so that these members could formulate improved procedures for effective opioid treatment programs. This study took a different approach toward reducing the opioid epidemic by observing a population not commonly thought of with respect to this topic: community members. Understanding through their lens, both these programs and the individuals who are opioid abusers, helped fill the gap in understanding community members' perceptions by formulating new policies and new educational modules to improve the successful



reintegration of these women in treatment programs and to reduce opioid abuse and dependency. This understanding also helped by leading to create education modules for rehabilitation and abstinence.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was (a) to understand community members' perception of opioid abuse treatment programs, programs that help reduce opioid abuse and dependency for women in Westchester County, and (b) to understand community members' perceptions of the women dealing with opioid abuse and entering into these treatment programs. The goal was to address the increasing rates of opioid abuse and the lack of involvement of community members by understanding the perceptions of community members. Previous research guided the study's qualitative design and the development of the three research questions.

This project was unique in three ways: (a) it addressed a population that had not been significantly studied, community members; (b) it focused on an area that lacked research, the perceptions of those community members; (c) it focused on an area that lacked research within the opioid epidemic, Westchester County.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study included three research questions. Face-to-face interviews were used to collect data targeting the research questions.

1. How do community members perceive opioid abuse treatment programs within their living areas in Westchester County?

2. How effective do community members view opioid abuse treatment programs in their ability to reduce the number of addictions, crimes, and deaths related to opioid abuse?
3. How do community members perceive individuals who choose to enter the treatment programs?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The theoretical framework for this study was social labeling theory by Howard Becker (1963). In his book, *Outsiders*, Becker addressed the idea that all social groups create rules and attempt to reinforce them (p. 1). These rules, and subsequently their reinforcement, stand on their own as compared to judicial rules, rules created through laws, and enforcement—although judicial rules might impact the policies a social group creates and enforces. These rules, as such, are known as labels. Becker’s basis for this theory is that labels create a deviant behavior. According to his theory, individuals act based on how they are perceived. As such, individuals react based on how they are labeled by others who have a relationship with them. When an individual is deviant, he or she is consequently labeled as an outsider. That labeling of deviance and the creation of the outsider is what leads an individual to continue the deviant behavior and thus continue to be the outsider.

For Becker, there are various ways in which relationships are formed, both formally and informally. Regardless of which category a relationship falls into, the societal norms that create labels greatly impact an individual’s deviant behavior. These labels are further impacted because the behaviors that are considered deviant are

subjective rather than objective and can change over time (Ritzer, 2004). This puts control of labels and deviant behavior in the hands of societal groups rather than focuses on the individual who has gained this label and become the outsider. The subjective nature also makes it difficult for the outsider to redeem a positive role in society because she or he is continuously trying to understand the label and what is considered deviant behavior. In turn, the individual dismisses social norms themselves and continues to remain the outsider as the social groups continue to label him or her as such.

For this study, the community members were part of the social group who labeled the women entering opioid abuse treatment programs. It was important to recognize how community members label treatment programs and women who use opioids in order to address the reintegration of these women into society and, ultimately, becoming members of that community. It was important that the community defined its subjective view of these labels to understand how the labels impacted the women in rehabilitation and the overall community. Understanding how community members perceived individuals who entered treatment programs could greatly influence the effect of such programs both on the individuals dealing with opioid abuse and the community as a whole. Lastly, this understanding could also create a basis for understanding how community members, as a social group, create and understand the labels associated with the opioid epidemic. Understanding how community members perceive opioids, opioid abuse treatment programs, and women who use opioids through the theoretical framework of social labeling theory can also have great impact on current policy.

### **Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study was qualitative using a phenomenological approach. This phenomenological study sought to understand how the world appears through the perspective of participants, in this case, community members (Trochim & Land, 2006), which helped to explain their lived experiences and their understanding of opioids, treatment programs, women who use opioids, and community roles within these programs.

The data collection method was one-on-one interviews. The sampling population was community members 18 and older that lived in a locale of Westchester County. These individuals were a member of Westchester County for a minimum of 5 years and provided this proof through the initial recruitment questionnaire. A minimum of twenty interviews were conducted to reach data saturation (See Appendix C for a sample of the interview protocol). Once completed, the interviews were coded, categorized, and analyzed. Analysis yielded themes and comparison among the interviews. A qualitative approach was consistent with understanding community members' perception of opioid abuse treatment programs in Westchester County. Focusing on community members' perception of opioid abuse treatment programs was consistent through a phenomenological approach.

### **Definitions**

*Opioids*: a class of drugs taken to reduce pain (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Opioids can be legal, such as prescription opioids, or can be illegal, such as heroin.

*Opioid abuse:* physical and psychological reliance on an opioid (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Opioid abuse occurs once an individual becomes dependent on that substance.

*Opioid epidemic:* beginning in the late 1990s, pharmaceutical companies began advertising the benefits of opioids, stressing it would not cause addiction; however, this led to misuse and over-prescription for legal opioids. This led to what is known now as the epidemic and categorized as a public health emergency (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Opioid abuse is a leading factor in the opioid epidemic.

*Treatment program:* a program an opioid abuser is able to enter to receive detoxification and take steps toward rehabilitation and successful re-entry. Programs may be inpatient or outpatient: this is dependent on the user's desire as there is no set protocol to a treatment program.

*Community member:* An individual who is a contributing member in his or her respective locale and actively living in Westchester County. It is important that community members be defined as individuals who interact with his or her environment on an everyday basis regardless of how that interaction is defined or viewed.

### **Assumptions**

Opioid abuse treatment programs have been proven as an effective method of reducing recidivism and dependency while offering successful reentry into society. As the general topic of this study was understanding the perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs in Westchester County, three assumptions were believed, but they cannot be verified as true:

- Community members were not familiar with the structure, expectations, or goals of an opioid treatment program.
- Community members were not stakeholders in the treatment programs within Westchester County; however, were stakeholders within their locale.
- Community members would be more adept at accepting and assisting women who have completed their treatment programs into successful reentry into the community if they were educated on these topics.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

In research, a delimitation is defined as the limitations a researcher is able to set within her own study to ensure accuracy, timeliness, and completion. It was important for the researcher to control what could and could not be done within the selected study and how the study would be carried out. The delimitations were guided by the researcher's research questions, sample population, theoretical framework, and significance. For this study, the goal was to understand community members' perception of opioid abuse treatment programs for women within Westchester County, New York.

In this research study, community members' perceptions of opioid abuse treatment programs were analyzed. The focus was on Westchester County. This focus was chosen because, although Westchester County does not have the highest rates of opioid users, its steadily increasing rates indicated that more research needed to be conducted to understand the role that community members played in the reduction of opioid abuse and dependency.

The scope of the study was limited to community members who had lived in Westchester County for a minimum of 5 years. The study only focused on the perceptions of opioid abuse and treatment programs and did not ask about personal use of such substances or programs. As previously stated, there was a lack of studies regarding community members' perception of treatment programs in Westchester County; therefore, the findings from this research study were beneficial in further assessing opioid abuse treatment programs and ultimately reducing and eliminating the epidemic. However, it should be noted that while transferability of the study was possible, generalizability was not guaranteed due to the specific nature of participants and experimental design.

### **Limitations**

Proportional challenges of this were recruitment of participants and ensuring participants were interviewed from the various locales in Westchester County. A solution to this challenge was to ensure recruitment paperwork was distributed evenly among each locale. This was also ensured by using the Westchester County Department of Health's (n.d.) design of regions and municipalities. Using this design ensured the researcher was able to gather participants from each region to reach an understanding of community members in Westchester County and data saturation.

A limitation of the study was the focus being on Westchester County. Although this study focused specifically on Westchester County, the findings from this study offered an insight for other researchers, indicating the importance for studying community members and allowing for reproductions within other counties experiencing

the same challenges. It also was important to ensure a clear separation between the role as a researcher and the role as a member living in Westchester County to limit the bias that might be encountered. A solution to this challenge was to inform all participants of the researcher's status as a resident of Westchester County as well as to explain to them the measures that were taken to ensure their confidentiality, and the study's validity and trustworthiness.

### **Significance**

It was important to study the increase in opioid abuse in Westchester County and its relationship to crime and death in order to understand the perceptions of community members and their role in the decline of substance abuse, specifically opioid abuse. Their perception of opioid abuse treatment programs could greatly enhance the success of the programs by allowing them to become stakeholders in the programs to help promote recovery and helping them reintegrate into society. This research had practical application because it would allow for opioid abuse treatment programs to make changes that would create social support through community members, members who would have more active roles in the treatment and reintegration process. Furthermore, the findings of this study could increase much-needed social support for these treatment programs and the women entering these programs. It would allow the treatment programs to understand how community members perceived their role in the process so that the treatment programs would be more effective and sustainable for patients. Understanding community members' perception of such programs could allow for growth in research



and acceptance of these women in recovery while promoting their reintegration into society through decreased opioid abuse.

### **Significance to Practice**

This study and its findings are significant in the policy making associated with opioids and opioid abuse treatment programs. As noted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2017), the opioid epidemic is a public health emergency. As such, community members are an essential population and one that has not been studied in detail. This population can offer abundant information and evidence which could greatly impact both public policy and public health. The findings from this study, the perceptions of community members, could impact how programs are currently run; they could affect policy in a way that could ensure positive reintegration of opioid abusers into society.

### **Significance to Theory**

The problem addressed in this study focused on the impact of opioid abuse and understanding the perceptions of community members toward women in opioid abuse treatment programs. Drug abuse, specifically opioid abuse, became more popular to study and research as the death, crime, and addiction rates continuously rose. This study took a new approach toward understanding the role community members played in the rehabilitation process. This was an area of study that was very limited, so this study hoped to open a pathway for continuous studies to be done towards understanding the perceptions of community members toward these programs and how that impacted the overall success of the programs and rehabilitation of the abusers. Understanding the community members' perceptions and labels associated with opioids, treatment

programs, and women who use opioids could greatly enhance the policy structure associated with these programs and the impact education and awareness could have on those labels.

### **Significance to Social Change**

Community members and their perceptions of opioid abuse treatment programs have been little studied. Although much of the rehabilitation process has focused on the treatment program itself and the individuals who enter these programs, community members should not be discounted from the rehabilitation process since they are stakeholders within their communities. It is important that community members define their role as they perceived and understood it since they are stakeholders in the community and should be stakeholders within these programs. Once their role is defined, they can gain a better understanding of opioid abusers and treatment programs while promoting abusers' successful reintegration into society. This, in turn, can help individuals remain abstinent and allow for community members to feel welcomed and understood in their role throughout the rehabilitation process. It is important that policy makers, programs, and community members understand these roles so that the rates of death, crime, and dependency associated with opioid abuse are significantly lowered.

### **Summary and Transition**

The lack of research on understanding community members' perception of opioid abuse treatment programs greatly hindered their efficacy due to community members' lack of understanding. Individuals who entered these programs received necessary detoxification and support that might not otherwise be received once out of treatment.

When community members did not have a discussed and defined role in these treatment programs, the success of the women struggling with opioid abuse was affected. Allowing community members to understand what treatment programs achieve, as well as allowing them the opportunity to be a stakeholder in such programs, could improve the overall success of these programs within Westchester County, New York. Studying community members (a) increased understanding of the opioid epidemic that could lead to its overall decline and (b) offered insight that community members are in fact interested in educational programs and involvement within programs. In this chapter, the topic of the study and its importance was introduced. The background, problem, purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and nature were also presented. Finally, the scope, delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study were examined.

A review of the literature is provided in Chapter 2. A review of the methods is provided in Chapter 3. The results are provided in Chapter 4. Discussions and recommendations are provided in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The opioid epidemic is now under scrutiny more than ever. In January, 2019, the National Institute on Drug Abuse noted that more than 130 people in the United States died each day from an opioid overdose. Moreover, experts indicated between a 2-fold increase in the past decade in death related to opioid overdose in relationship to gender; in 2010, illicit opioid overdose was the leading cause of death worldwide (Anderson, Reinsmith-Jones, Brooks, Jr., & Langsam, 2017, p. 7), and Drug Policy (2020) identified the Northeast and Midwest as having the sharpest increases for overdose death which is where Westchester County, New York is located. These numbers associated with opioid use have made it a topic of interest in various areas of study including but not limited to: criminal justice, law, and public policy.

This epidemic was further complicated by the two categories in which opioids fell under: legal and illegal. These high statistics necessitated the need for more understanding and programming for opioid reduction. Although there were various methods currently used to control and reduce opioid dependency, such as incarceration, one of the more common methods were opioid abuse treatment programs. These programs developed in a number of ways as the recovery varied from individual to individual and could not be generalized. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (2019) had made these programs a priority for improvement and recovery.

Although these statistics alone were indicative of the severity of this epidemic, it was important to note Westchester County, New York was a specific county where the

rates of opioid dependency and death were on the rise. As such, much research and initiative have gone into fixing these programs to better suit opioid abusers so that they were able to recover and reduce dependency and recidivism in some cases. The opioid abuse treatment programs worked hard on creating a systemic, organized environment for the opioid users; however, this systemic, organized environment tended to become lost for the user once that recovering user was no longer in treatment. In order to reduce opioid dependency and death in Westchester County, more research must be done to understand the perception of community members. These members played a vital role within the community as stakeholders, and if they were accounted for within the recovery process, policies could be changed to be more effective.

The goal of this literature review was to understand the effectiveness of opioid abuse treatment programs and how the effort of these programs and the individuals within the programs may be impacted by the overall perceptions of community members. By understanding the perceptions of community members, Westchester County could help its opioid abusers and the various treatment programs available to them.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategy consisted of scholarly databases provided by Walden University, government and state specific websites, and various search engines. The scholarly databases used for this literature search included: Criminal Justice Database, Google Scholar, SAGE, ProQuest Central, and EBSCO. The government and state-specific websites included: The New York Department of Health, The New York Senate Majority Coalition, The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Walden Library and Google were the search engines primarily used in the search process for various definitions, understandings, and frameworks of the topic at hand.

The terms and phrases used in the literature search included the following:

*community member, perspective, treatment program, community social support, women dealing with substance abuse, substance abuse in Westchester County, effective policy, treatment programs, effective women substance abuse treatment program, social learning theory and drug abuse, social support, and effective programming for young women.* Depending on the database, the terms were combined to increase number of hits.

Although there has been substantive research on opioids, treatment programs, opioid users, and gender specific, there was limited research done on community members respectively. The articles found focused primarily on the understanding of substance abuse treatment programs, opioid abuse, and gender specific opioid abuse rather than the lens of community members.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social labeling theory, at its core, analyzes how social groups defined and applied deviant behavior. This theory focused less on the deviant nature of a behavior and more on how a label might either create a deviant behavior or stigmatize an individual once that deviant behavior was performed. Thus, this theory focused on subjective understandings rather than objective identifications (Ritzer, 2004). This meant that a behavior viewed as deviant by one group of people might not be viewed as deviant by others. Additionally, behaviors categorized as deviant might shift overtime.

Howard Becker (1963) was recognized as the theorist who formulated social labeling theory. In his understanding, Becker came to view deviance and labels as working together rather than separately. In his argument, those labeled as “outsiders” essentially will act how they were perceived (1963). Furthermore, he argued deviance was created not from the deviant behavior itself but rather from the responses created and understood from individuals (p. 18). Deviance, therefore, was an object that involuntarily created conflict as it might not be a behavior agreed and understood as deviant by all persons.

Although labels existed on an everyday basis through societal norms and culture, deviant labels defined a stigma which had negative implications (Gunnar Bernburg, 2009). That negative implication was that the deviant label sets aside that individual as different and ultimately discriminated. The difference and discrimination was what led to a crime occurring regardless of whether or not the behavior was a crime due to the label created through societal understanding. Anderson, Reinsmith-Jones, Brooks, Jr., and Langsam (2017) further touched upon this theory indicating Becker’s argument ultimately stated a person’s identity stemmed from how others defined her and her behavior (p. 2). This theory was essential in understanding the perceptions community members had toward opioid users and opioid abuse treatment programs. Anderson et al. (2017) indicated the importance of looking at drug users through social labeling theory as it provided an exhaustive description of how the role of stigmatization, more specifically labeling, played and impacted the drug user.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Labeling Theory and Community Members**

In social labeling theory, there were two institutions that created labels. Those two institutions consisted of formal and informal bodies; community members, family, friends made up the latter and the judicial system being the former. With respect to opioid use, labeling an individual as an addict or as an offender could have negative effects on the individual and her desire to achieve a life where opioids were not a constant need. For this study, social labeling theory was the theoretical framework chosen as it allowed the researcher to understand how community members perceived the opioid user and the treatment programs. Previous research indicated how important it was for drug users to be given methods other than jail sentences to reduce recidivism and overall dependency. Previous research also indicated the need for social support for overall improvement. The opioid users who were seeking help understood the negative effects their addiction has had on their lives and the lives of those close to them; however, their ability to overcome the addiction and ultimately become a positive member of the community relied very much in how those community members perceived and labeled them. This study sought to understand how these community members labeled women who entered opioid abuse treatment programs along with understanding how that impacted the community member and conclusively the user who sought support, treatment, and successful reintegration into society.



## **Overview of Prevalence of Opioid Dependency in Westchester County**

When the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services declared the opioid epidemic as a public health emergency, it also announced a strategy to combat the epidemic. In this strategy, five major points focused on: improved access to treatment and recovery, promotion of overdose-reversing drugs, strengthened public health surveillance, provided support for more research, and advanced practices of pain management (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). In these strategies, there was no mention of the community member; however, the strategy did conclude that lack of community did create a deeper problem for the overall epidemic. As the conclusion of this document stated, it should be noted more research within the area of community and social support should be studied rather than just a focus on these defined five strategies.

Opioid dependency increased substantially throughout the nation, and Westchester County, New York was no different. In fact, prescribed opioids accounted for almost half of drug-related deaths in 2015 and about two-thirds of all opioid related deaths (NYS Health Foundation, n.d.). Although opioid patterns varied significantly throughout New York State, key findings indicated higher prescribing did occur within the Hudson Valley Region which was where Westchester County was located (NYS Health Foundation, n.d.). The higher prescribing of opioids thus related to higher rates of dependency and abuse.

The New York State Commissioner of Health was mandated by Public Health Law § 3309(5) to publish findings of statewide opioid data. This public health law was

specifically created to address and prevent opioid overdose. This data included: opioid overdose deaths, emergency department visits, hospitalizations, treatment admissions, and naloxone administration encounters. For these findings, opioids included prescription opioids such as oxycodone and non-prescribed opioids such as heroin. This report included data from New York State which Westchester County, New York, was a part of. This PBH § 3309 indicated New York State viewed opioid abuse as a concern and one it was willing to manage and reduce.

In 2016, the New York State Senate Majority Coalition created a Joint Task Force with the goal of addressing the growing rates of opioid abuse and dependency. In this report, the members outlined the passing of eleven bills by Governor Cuomo and the budget of \$2.25 million for substance abuse funding (NY Senate, 2016). This amount was substantially increased to \$200 million in April 2017 based on the recommendations by the Heroin and Opioid Task Force. In the former approach, there were four steps considered as important to the successful reduction of substance abuse: prevention, treatment, recovery, and enforcement. In the concluding addition, the focus areas included prevention, treatment, and recovery (NYS Health Foundation, n.d.). Although these approaches were all necessary and fundamental, they each lacked one major component: involvement of community members and their perceptions of such approaches. The task force noted the importance of support as a method to remain abstinent. The task force also noted for an opioid abuser in rehabilitation, an environment that lacked support would lead to relapse (NY Senate, 2016, p. 14). The missing factor in this information was understanding that support itself. This lack of information regarding

how the community understood its role in social support and understood that basic ideology of what social support was ultimately limited the success of this task force and the continuing approved bills.

In 2017, the New York State Department of Health established the opioid annual report that indicated the continual growth of deaths related to opioid overdoses. In this report, not only was it noted the annual deaths as doubled (p. 8), but also a steady increase for each gender (NYS Department of Health, p. 9). This rate of increase was recorded at 5.7% (NYS Department of Health). Although this rate was lower than that of male rates of overdose, it was still an important area to understand as the rates were continuously increasing. The number of research studies done toward understanding the different rates of opioid overdose associated deaths still did not address how the community perceived or understood those numbers. It was important that this study addressed not only the perceived understanding of opioids and associated treatment programs but also how the community perceived those same entities relating to women.

### **Women and Substance Abuse Dependency**

There were gender disparities when it related to opioid abuse. One of those disparities was the way women perceived pain as compared to males. Evidence dictated women were more sensitive to the perception of pain (Koons, Greenberg, Cannon, Beauchamp, 2018). Furthermore, women were placed at higher risks for misuse and abuse due to pregnancy (Anderson et al., 2017). These factors all contributed to the higher risk women faced at becoming addicted to opioids and misusing the drugs. This was further complicated by national data that indicated women were more likely to be

prescribed opioids by healthcare professionals (Koons et al., 2018, p. 190). These factors signified the need to understand opioid abuse and dependency within women and how that affected their choice of program and reintegration into society.

Rates of death, crime, and dependency were especially important to note when looking at gender differences. With respect to opioid overdose deaths, the rates for women were more dramatic, occurring at a 5-fold increase as compared to a 3.6-fold increase for males (Koons et al., 2018, p. 191). Although the national opioid abuse was higher for women than men, the rates specifically in Westchester, were the opposite. This disparity might be apparent for many reasons, and one of those reasons might be the stigmatization women faced in admitting they had an addiction to opioids or sought help especially as a mother or during reproductive years.

This was further complicated by the various perceptions of pregnancy, women, and opioid abuse. Koons et al. (2018) identified pregnant women as a special population as they experienced a new level of pain, pregnancy-related pain, and the fetus could experience direct exposures from any opioid use. In their research, Kennedy-Hendricks, McGinty, & Barry (2016) addressed this issue and acknowledged improved communication strategies could ultimately reduce the stigma while increasing public support. McLean (2017) also used media in her study to understand how representations of women as drug users and mothers affected perception and social support. In her findings, McLean (2017) noted how the representations offered by the media could have a detrimental effect on the policies and the women themselves who were working through their own rehabilitation and dependency. Although these studies had positive

implications, the focus was on media narratives and how adults perceived those narratives. The studies only focused on pregnancy narratives and in Pennsylvania respectively rather than on women as a gender who were opioid abusers in Westchester County, NY.

Brown, Tracy, Jun, Park, & Min (2015) examined the experiences women faced when in treatment for substance dependency and abuse. In their examination, they noted how important the use of networks and networking were in the recovery process. As important as it was for these women to seek support through treatment programs, it was also important the women were aware of their networks and relationships which they were creating and maintaining. Through their examination, the researchers were able to determine that negative and conflictual relationships could create relapses (p. 2). The goal of their study, then, was to determine the personal relationships needed for women with substance abuse. In their results, they were able to conclude women sought to create new relationships while also maintaining previous relationships they had prior to entering treatment. Although this study was important in addressing the social support aspect needed of women in treatment programs, it failed to address how social support was perceived by those outside of the programs and not patients, i.e. community members. These women who sought social support from their previous relationships, such as with other community members, might understand how they wanted and needed social support but not how the community member might view that same support. Understanding the other viewpoint was essential as that viewpoint was what was able to offer the support. Furthermore, the research broadly categorized substances rather than focusing on a

particular one such as this current study. Therefore, more research needed to be done in understanding social support and perception through the lens of community members. Understanding their perception thus would allow for a reduction of negative and conflictual relationships while improving the support community members were willing and able to offer the women dealing with opioid abuse.

The evidence indicated women experienced pain and addiction differently than men. The evidence also indicated women had a special characteristic: pregnancy. These differences were one of the reasons Terplan, Longinaker, & Appel (2015) examined the role women-centered substance abuse treatment programs played in the rehabilitation process. In their study, they surveyed 13,000 facilities and noticed the decline of women-centered substance abuse treatment centers. Although there was a decline in women-specific programming, the need for those programs did not decline.

This section focused on how there were gender differences among men and women when looking at opioid abuse. Because of this, there should be programs that focused on the specific needs of women to ensure the best access for the women in rehabilitation while offering support. These differences made it important to not only understand the perceptions of community members toward the programs and support these women need but to the women themselves. It was important that the perceptions of community members for the women and toward opioid abuse treatment programs were understood to ensure these women were able to successfully reintegrate into society and receive the support women specifically needed.

## **Examining Substance Abuse Treatment Programs**

Substance abuse treatment programs have been in effect since the early 1960s; however, their demand and growth has been substantial in the most recent years. Polcin, Mericle, Callahan, Harvey, & Jason (2016) noted the consistency treatment programs have had on substance abuse. Effective treatment programs for substance abuse should be efficient, professional, and engaging (Fields, Knudsen, & Roman, 2016). The design, implementation, and organization (p. 355) of these programs greatly impacted the success rates and the ability for users to remain abstinent.

There were many important roles a substance abuse treatment program played for the patient, the community, and the taxpayers. First and foremost, substance abuse treatment programs have been proven to be cost-effective while also reducing dependency and improving self-efficiency. In research conducted by Settumba, Chambers, Shanahan, Schofield, & Butler (2017), the positive economic and social value of drug abuse prevention was examined. The results indicated prevention treatment programs were cost effective as compared to incarceration and re-incarceration (p. 424). This was an important finding as it addressed the positive correlations between treatment programs and reduction in imprisonment. It was important to note opioids were considered a substance and thus fell under the substance abuse treatment program category. This research indicated it was more effective for funding to go toward prevention treatment programs as compared to jail systems.

Much of the media and knowledge around substance abuse treatment programs stemmed from its proactive versus reactive results as compared to the expected criminal

justice system. The shift from enticing severe punishment to favorable alternatives had left individuals choosing substance abuse treatment programs either in conjunction with jail sentences or alone (Anderson et al., 2017). Research has indicated that the judicial system and policy should not be considered as different entities when dealing with drug use, and in this case, opioid use. Anderson et al. (2017) indicated the importance of using the two entities together with a focus being on rehabilitation and overall improvement for the opioid abuser. Furthermore, as more research was conducted and the underlying issues associated with drug use were unveiled, public policy makers, criminal justice practitioners, and the general public were realizing the crime of drug use was better dealt with through treatment rather than punishment (p. 6). Moreover, national surveys and polls have addressed the importance of substance abuse treatment programs indicating participants believed in treatment programs and that rehabilitation could ultimately lead to living a life that strayed from crime (Anderson et al., 2017). The polls and surveys discussed within this study date back to 2012 and focused on a national count rather than a specific locale count. Although the national perception of substance abuse treatment programs was positive, there was little research that focused specifically on community members of Westchester County. Research was limited in understanding how community members of Westchester County, NY viewed the prevention treatment programs and their beliefs and perceptions associated with these programs.

Much research had been done on implementing these substance abuse programs and even more research had been done on creating positive and successful substance abuse programs. Del Boca, McRee, Vendetti, & Damon (2015) developed a matrix to



understand the values associated with positive implementation of alcohol and drug treatment programs. The results indicated five major components toward achieving an implemented program: SBIRT services, performance sites, provider attributes, patient/client populations, and management structure and activities (p. 12). The matrix created addressed commonalities so that outcomes were improved and individuals were able to successfully complete programming and become positive members of society. Although the matrix addressed important issues related to successful and effective treatment programming, it failed to address the community perceptions of these programs. Understanding the community perception of these programs and their ability for successful reintegration was just as important as understanding the patient/client population entering these treatment programs.

One important aspect of treatment programs was residency. Location played a major role in successful implementation, completion, and commitment within the recovery process. As prevention treatment centers might be in-house or outpatient, it was important to understand the role residency played within prevention treatment programs. Research conducted on recovery residencies indicated stability and drug-free environments as necessities to maintain abstinence (Polcin, Mericle, Callahan, Harvey, & Jason, 2016). The researchers expanded on this topic by indicating a major component for long-term recovery did include social support. This research study focused specifically on recovery residencies located in California and Philadelphia. Results from this study indicated alcohol and drug free environments along with social support as the necessities for long-term recovery and abstinence. Although this was important, the study

only focused on recovery residencies that were not located in Westchester County, NY. In addition, the individuals with whom the opioid abusers interacted with on a daily basis were individuals who were also in recovery or individuals who understood the logistics and policies of such programs. The research failed to determine how those same alcohol and drug free environments along with social support could be created in an environment which an abuser might already live in. There was no guarantee individuals were able to enter recovering residencies, so it was important that the social support also be understood from members of the communities, specifically Westchester County, NY.

There was a clear correlation between effective substance abuse treatment programs and sustained recovery. Although there were many components needed to address the sustained recovery on part of the individual herself, there were also components outside of the individual's control that ultimately might help or hinder the recovery process. Stokes, Schultz, & Alpaslan (2018) conducted a qualitative study where participants noted their entry and recovery. In their description, they noted sustained interpersonal relationships as a positive and a necessity in sustained recovery. As much research and evidence done for these treatment programs showing support as an effective and necessary method of recovery and abstinence, the lack of research on the perceptions of treatment programs through community members restricted the all-inclusive capabilities of these treatment programs.

### **Understanding Perception of Treatment Programs**

Understanding the effectiveness of substance abuse treatment programs was important; however, it was also important to understand the perception of the substance

abuse treatment programs. To understand the beliefs and attitudes associated with drug treatment programs, Booth, Stewart, Curran, Cheney, & Borders (2014) conducted a multiple regression analysis to determine the perceived need of treatment, perceived effectiveness of treatment, and perceived stigma. The sample focused on African-American cocaine users and the findings indicated important results regarding perception of treatment programs. In their results, the researchers noted stigma played a role in determining if a treatment program was needed and effective. In that stigma aspect, secrecy also played a role in determining the need for entering a treatment program. These results indicated how individuals perceived their labels highly determined their perceived need for entering a program. Although the research focused on an illegal substance, it did not discuss opioid addiction. Along with this stigma, Stumbo, Yarborough, McCarty, Weisner, & Green (2017) addressed the stigma of being treated with others who might not have the same opioid addiction which might deter one from seeking a prevention treatment program. Thus, the stigmatization of an individual or her behavior could greatly impact her ability or desire to enter a program. Additionally, as important as the research was toward understanding a drug user's perception of stigma, it did not address the perception of community members toward opioid users.

Stigma played a vital role in the perceptions of treatment programs. Stigma was also an area not researched as comprehensively within the opioid epidemic as noted by Goodyear, Hass-Koffler, & Chavanne (2018). Their results indicated stigmatization characterized by each participant indicated perception of opioid abuse negatively impacted the success of treatment. Kennedy-Hendricks, Barry, Gollust, Ensminger,

Chisolm, & McGinty (2017) also conducted a research study with the goal of understanding stigma. In their study, a web-based survey was designed to understand if stigma was associated with support toward prescription opioid use disorder and policy interventions. In this survey, questions were asked that addressed stigma, support for policy interventions, and social groups. In their results, the respondents indicated that individuals who struggled with prescription opioid use disorder were to blame for their addiction and that they lacked self-discipline in using the drugs without becoming addicted (Kennedy et al., 2017, p. 464). The survey also questioned the respondent's personal experience with prescription opioids to which it noted similar responses to the questions regardless of using prescription opioids personally, knowing someone who used prescription opioids, or not having a relationship to prescription.

Kennedy-Hendricks et al. (2017) conducted a study to determine the percentages of social stigma. Based on the results, the researchers noted the importance of reducing stigma to reduce punitive policies and increase public social support (p. 466). It was important to note that the study concluded no significant difference among race, income, and geographical location based on the respondent's understanding and perception of prescription opioid disorder (p. 464). Although the study indicated the importance stigma played in social support of prescription abuse disorder, it only focused on prescription opioid use disorder rather than opioid abuse generally.

This study indicated the vital role stigma played in relationship to policies, support, and understanding.

As opioid misuse rose in both its legal and illegal forms, it was imperative that all opioids be accounted and studied. Furthermore, it did not consider the gender disparities in opioid abuse and understanding the perception of individuals toward women who were opioid abusers. Lastly, although the results of the studies indicated it was important to understand stigma must be reduced in order to improve the overall success of public policies toward opioids, the samples used were national and the data collection was quantitative rather than qualitative. The quantitative nature of the discussed studies defined a general understanding of the social stigma; however, they were not able to fully understand the social stigma community members placed on the opioid users as a qualitative study would be able to do. Moreover, these studies only focused on stigma of opioid abuse rather than on opioid abuse treatment programs. They also did not outline why individuals maintained these perceptions or how they defined the perceptions within the context of opioid abuse and respective treatment programs. It was important to understand community members' perception, specifically in Westchester County, New York, for women in opioid abuse treatment programs rather than just considering this national sample. It was also important to conduct a qualitative study to gain a lived experience of community members rather than a generalizable understanding.

Community members and peers played a core role in the implementation of effective treatment programs and effective rehabilitation; however, their role managed to be overlooked. As such, Tracy & Wallace (2016) searched for studies published in 1999 or later to understand the benefits of peer support in various treatment programs. In their results, they included ten studies, and indicated peer support was a promising inclusion

toward these prevention treatment programs; however, there was a lack of research to further the point of peer support. As such, there was a lack of research in understanding the perception of community members toward these treatment programs.

This section demonstrated the lack of research done to fully understand how community members perceived social support, opioid use and dependency, and opioid abuse treatment programs. The lack of research within this area greatly hindered the overall effect of such programs toward declining opioid addictions.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

As described in the literature, opioid use and abuse was continuously rising throughout the United States, and more specifically, in Westchester County, NY. The misuse of the opioids created what is known as the opioid epidemic. There was an array of research indicating the effective nature of prevention treatment programs. When implemented correctly and following a systematic matrix, these programs were proven effective for the individuals entering with opioid abuse along with being cost effective for taxpayers as compared to the jail system. The literature also touched upon the need for these programs to be effective for women specifically as well as the difficulties they face as gender disparities did exist. These gender disparities, especially in the ability to manage pain, impacted the susceptibility to addiction and stigmatization. The literature review also focused on the perception of these treatment programs and the need for social support. Lastly, the literature review briefly discussed perceptions of peers and understanding of peer support to address the lack of research. Through the literature, it was evident that community members were not accounted for during the prevention

treatment programs or in their understanding of social support. It was also evident this lack of research greatly hindered the success of the women in rehabilitation, the success of the treatment programs, and the success of the community as a whole. As much research and evidence there was to indicate the positive results associated with opioid abuse treatment programs and assessing what a patient may need when entering these programs, there was limited research in understanding how the role of a community member was defined, understood, and acknowledged. Understanding the perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs was necessary in order to offer the most success for women dealing with opioid abuse and for community members who might interact with these individuals. This current study created a benchmark for including community members in the treatment programs so that they might fully understand what the program entailed and how they viewed their role within its implementation. It also created an understanding of the women who are opioid users through the lens of community members. This current study also was used to understand how community members perceived these programs specifically within Westchester County, New York.

Through a phenomenological approach, the perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs in Westchester County, New York were understood. The method of this phenomenological study is examined in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was two-fold: (a) to understand community members' perception of opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County and (b) to understand community members' perceptions of women dealing with opioid abuse and entering these treatment programs. This study addressed the lack of involvement of community members and the increasing rates of opioid abuse by understanding the perceptions of community members. It used previous literature to guide the qualitative design and research questions. This project was unique because it addressed a population that has not been significantly studied: community members. It focused on an area that lacked research: the perceptions of those community members. Lastly, it also addressed an area that also lacked research with respect to opioid abuse and treatment programs, Westchester County, NY.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

In this phenomenological study, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews were used to collect data based on three research questions.

1. How do community members perceive opioid abuse treatment programs within their living areas in Westchester County?
2. How effective do community members view opioid abuse treatment programs in their ability to reduce the number of addictions, crimes, and deaths related to opioid abuse?



3. How do community members perceive individuals who choose to enter the treatment programs?

Of these three questions, the principal one was RQ1 because it addressed the understanding of community members about the opioid abuse treatment programs within their living areas in Westchester County. RQ2 and RQ3 were developed to address members' understanding of the effectiveness of treatment programs and thus their perception of the individuals who entered these programs. For this study, women were the study's main focus was on understanding the perceptions of community members toward women in opioid abuse treatment programs.

The goal of this study was to understand how community members perceived opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County, NY. As such, a qualitative study was required to understand these perceptions. The qualitative design allowed for more detailed information from a smaller set of participants, detail that could not be obtained from a quantitative design. Furthermore, a phenomenological design was used because the research was to understand the lived experiences of community members. It was important that the study reflected the perceptions of the participants as the goal was to understand the way in which a community member perceived women in opioid abuse treatment programs. Because of the research questions and their design, it was important that the study employed a qualitative method.

The use of a qualitative method allowed the researcher to gain insight into community members and how they perceived opioid abuse treatment programs. The specific qualitative method that was used was one-on-one interviews. These interviews

consisted of six main questions where the researcher was able to understand a select number of community members and their perceptions of the opioid abuse treatment programs. The use of interviews allowed the researcher to gain insight into how a community member perceived these treatment programs and ultimately created a basis for community members to become external stakeholders within these treatment programs and their respective communities.

### **Role of the Researcher**

At the time this research was being conducted, the researcher resided in Yonkers, a part of Westchester County, New York. As the setting of the study took place in Westchester County, there was a possibility that the researcher would be interviewing individuals she might know. Although this was a possibility, the researcher ensured all information was kept confidential throughout the entire study and data collection process and that all information is disposed of after the expected 5-year time frame. The researcher also ensured recruitment was done on a general basis so that it was open to all residents of Westchester County; however, only the residents that fit the necessary criteria were asked to schedule an interview. The requirements set up by the researcher also reflected the objective view of data collection to ensure participants were being selected based on those requirements.

The researcher could not guarantee anonymity; however, the researcher did not discuss the study outside of the interview unless the participants indicated they would like to be updated once the study was complete. The researcher also referred to the participants by a pseudonym in the study itself. Each interviewee was also made aware of

the researcher's place of residence prior to beginning the interview. The researcher did not have personal authority over any possible participants, and as such, did not pose any personal or social association to influence participants. This was mitigated through the informed consent.

The researcher chose this topic based on her understanding of opioid use and abuse. As she had been a witness to the detrimental effects stigma and misperceptions can have on opioid abusers, she wanted to conduct research to understand the perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs and women who were opioid abusers. Although the topic was one of interest for the researcher, she ensured to remain unbiased and allowed the participants to guide the interview based on their responses. Incentives such as payment, gifts, or reimbursements were not provided for this study.

The researcher chose her place of employment to conduct the interviews. This place was chosen as it was open to the public and located in Riverdale, New York. To keep anonymity, the place of employment will be known at The Organization throughout this study. As The Organization was located outside of Westchester County, the researcher ensured confidentiality and anonymity within the study. The Organization also offered conference meeting rooms that were closed so that the interviews could be held between the interviewer and interviewee. This location ensured a place where the researcher could meet with the participants without interruption. Furthermore, the interviews occurred when the researcher was not mandated to be at work to ensure proper distinction between time as an employee and time as a researcher. The researcher did not

receive any compensation from her place of employment for the time spent conducting her research. In addition, because The Organization was open to the public, reserving meeting space was done as a researcher and not as an employee.

## **Method**

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Participants from this study were residents of Westchester County, New York, at least 18 years old, and a resident of their locale for a minimum of 5 years. The 5-year minimum was created based on the indication that 5 years would allow an individual time to become acclimated with his or her community to better answer the questions.

Residency could either be a home, apartment, or condominium and the members could either be renters or owners; these were not set criteria to be part of the study. The only set criteria was age of participant and length of time living in Westchester County, New York.

Westchester County had a population of 967,612, an almost 2% increase in size from the 2010 U.S. Census (U.S. Census, 2018). Within this population size, females made up 51.6% (U.S. Census, 2018). The growing population of Westchester County made it an important area to sample as the studies within this area and within this topic were lacking. This study's focus on women with opioid abuse and seeking treatment was based on the percentage of the population being more than half female. The sample size for this study was twenty participants and data saturation was met.

The Westchester County Department of Health broke down the areas of Westchester County by regions and municipalities. In this breakdown, there were six

planning regions and municipalities: Northwest, Northeast, West Central, East Central, Southwest, and Southeast. Each municipality contained a region within in Westchester County which allowed the researcher to track and ensure participants where living and naming locales of Westchester County. This breakdown provided by the Westchester County Department of Health was what was used to gather participants. It was the goal of interviewing an equal number of participants from each region and municipality to reach data saturation and generalizability.

An initial questionnaire (see Appendix B) was posted on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram) outlining the study so that individuals who were interested in being participants might be contacted. The social media post (see Appendix A) had the necessary information and link to the initial questionnaire. This initial questionnaire outlined the purpose of the study so that individuals were aware of what they were participating in if selected. In this social media post, there was a link. When clicked on, this link took the individual to fill out four main questions: if they lived in Westchester County, which locale of Westchester County they lived in, if they lived in Westchester County for a minimum of 5 years, and if they were at least 18 years of age. The fifth and final question asked for contact information if participant was selected for the study. The individual's choice to fill out the questionnaire indicated their consent to be contacted should they be selected to be a participant. All information collected from the initial questionnaire link was kept confidential and password protected. After this information was collected and the researcher reviewed the data to determine participants met the criteria, they were contacted to schedule one-on-one interviews. They were allowed to

give their date/time options and the researcher confirmed based on availability. The researcher sent reminder emails to the participants as well as ensured the chosen date/time was still convenient for the participant. As this was a phenomenological study, the sample size was twenty participants and data saturation was met. For this study, saturation was defined as the ability to gather no new information based on the interviews being conducted. The interview process concluded once the 20-participant threshold was met and data saturation was achieved.

### **Instrumentation**

The one-one-one interviews were recorded using an Apple device upon permission of the participant. An additional Apple device was used during the analysis portion of the study. The participants were asked to give verbal and written permission for the recording and the interview. The participants received a copy of the informed consent. The written and verbal consent was stored and will be locked for the mandatory 5-year timeframe. The Apple devices were locked and stored with the researcher. The researcher was the only individual who had access to the Apple devices. The password on the Apple devices were also changed once a month to ensure the data on the device remained confidential. The researcher also took notes, with participant's permission, during the interview. The notes were used in conjunction with the recordings during the analysis process.

An interview protocol (see Appendix C) was created by the researcher. In this protocol, there were six main questions created based on the research questions for this study. Each question addressed a component linked to the research questions. As the

study sought to understand the perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County, the research and interview questions were specifically tailored to understand the lived experiences of these community members. As such, these questions addressed community members' understanding of opioids, treatment programs, and women who used and abused opioids.

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

Participants were asked to partake in an estimated one-hour, one-on-one interview where the researcher gained insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County. The interviews were conducted by the researcher at her place of employment. The researcher's employment was open to the public but had private conference rooms where the interviews were held. The location offered free parking and was accessible by public transportation. The researcher waited outside the conference building to meet the participants and walked them to the room. Although the interviews took place at the researcher's place of employment, it was accessible and located in Riverdale, New York. The location did not cause bias as an individual must have been a resident in Westchester County in order to participate in the study. Furthermore, The Organization received many visitors on a daily basis which allowed for the participant to maintain confidentiality and anonymity within the study itself.

The data was collected solely by the researcher. The goal was to conduct four interviews a week. The smaller number of interviews conducted on a weekly basis allowed for more flexibility on the researcher's part and more availability for the

participants. Data was collected on an ongoing basis for two months and until data saturation was met. Data was recorded using an Apple device with the permission of the participants. The device was only accessed by the researcher and used solely for the study to ensure confidentiality. Once the interview was complete, the researcher typed up the dialogue based on the notes and recording and, although proposed to send to the participant to confirm the information from the interview, participants indicated recording confirmed information. Should there be a discrepancy, the researcher would offer the participant the ability to conduct another one-on-one interview. The discrepancies would be addressed within the study itself had there been any.

Should there be too few participants during the data collection period, the researcher would reopen the initial questionnaire to gain access to more participants. Based on the number of individuals who completed the initial questionnaire, the researcher might also reach out to those who were not able to schedule an interview. If reopening the questionnaire did not acquire more participants, the researcher would visit public areas such as libraries, shopping centers, and recreational centers throughout Westchester County to introduce herself, the study, and gain more participation.

Once the interview was complete, the participants were thanked for their time and given contact information should they want a copy of the study once it was complete or have any questions. Participants were given a copy of the signed informed consent form at the completion of the interview which contained all necessary contact information and background information for the study. The participants were notified who would have access to the study and how the study would be used to impact opioid abuse treatment



programs in Westchester County. Participants were not required to complete a follow-up interview; however, participants were given the option to be contacted once the study was complete should they be interested in becoming more involved with these opioid treatment programs and providing social support based on the study's results.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Through data collection and analysis, the perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County was examined. Phenomenology and thematic analysis was applied to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of community members. Based on the research questions and interview protocol, established themes were: relationships, stigmatization, and the perceptions of opioid abuse treatment programs and women who were opioid abusers. Through the interviews, the researcher was able to gain a comprehensive understanding of how community members viewed these concepts and their roles in offering social support.

The software NVivo was used along with the Apple device to create and analyze codes, categories, and themes. The software was purchased and used on a laptop that was dedicated to the study. The laptop was only accessible by the researcher to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, the password for the laptop was changed on a monthly basis similar to the Apple device for confidentiality.

Should there be any discrepant cases, they would be discussed in the study. Participants who did have discrepant cases would also be contacted again to ensure the information gathered was correct. As this was a phenomenological study, it was

important that any discrepancies in lived experiences and perceptions be addressed correctly and adequately within the study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility was directly related to the research design, instrumentation, and data of a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this research study, the researcher created research questions and an interview protocol based on the literature and studies already provided. Various perspectives were understood to ultimately create the perspective of this specific study. All research used for this study can be publicly accessed so other researchers are able to read any article in its entirety should they want to understand the literature further. As the literature referenced conducted both qualitative and quantitative methods, employing either method would prove beneficial; however, this research study employed a qualitative approach based on understanding perceptions of community members.

#### **Transferability**

Although this study focused specifically on Westchester County, the significant information in this study focused on understanding the perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs for women. Because of this, there were many components with the data in this study that could be used to recreate a study similar in another county, state, or country. The information could also focus on the treatment programs for men rather than women as this research study focused on. The criteria for selecting individuals to participate in the study was feeble which also allowed for transferability as there were not many restrictions the researcher placed on the

participants. The general requirements of the study was what allowed the study to be conducted with many other techniques other researchers may see fit.

### **Dependability**

As the researcher took notes, recorded interviews, and used software in the thematic analysis, there were audit and written trails. The trails will be available for 5 years after the conclusion of the study. After this time period, the data will be deleted to ensure confidentiality. The audit trails, however, would allow other researchers to understand the study and the results. The audit trails would also prove useful should other researchers want to conduct a similar study.

### **Confirmability**

The results from the study were analyzed, coded, categorized, and themed based on the lived experiences and perceptions of community members along with the literature review. This ensured the data remained unbiased and the interpretations based on community members' responses rather than the subjectivity of the researcher. This was also ensured through interview confirmation once interviews were complete. Participants received a copy of their informed consent only as they indicated recording of their interview to be confirmation of correct information. This confirmation will be stored along with all other information related to the study for the required 5 years.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Prior to beginning the interview, the participants were reminded of the study and gave permission to record and proceed with the interview as noted in the interview protocol (see Appendix C). The participants also were asked to read and sign an informed

consent form which they received a copy for their own records. The researcher also answered any questions regarding the informed consent form prior to the interview starting. The participants were protected from any threats or coercion for their participation in the study. Participants were not discriminated against based on their race, gender, socioeconomic background, sex, sexual orientation, education, or disabilities. The goal of the researcher was to ensure the participant pool was treated fairly and ethically. No incentives were provided and participation was completely voluntary. Participants also had the ability to stop the interview at any time if they wanted.

The identity of the participants was protected. Because these interviews were one-on-one and in person, the researcher could not guarantee anonymity; however, she could guarantee confidentiality of the participant and his or her answers. All data and data collection tools remained stored, locked, and password protected by the researcher. No other individual had access to the data and passwords were changed on a monthly basis to ensure confidentiality. All data and data collection methods will remain locked for 5 years at the conclusion of the study. Data will be available to the participants should they request it. It was planned for this study to be distributed to the Westchester Board of Legislators who was in charge of policies and procedures within Westchester County and Westchester County Department of Health from which the population sample of regions and municipalities is derived from once study was approved.

Prior to beginning the study, formal permission from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was given to conduct the study in conformity with the university's and the IRB's ethical standards (Approval No. 10-02-19-0747661). IRB

approval from The Organization was also given prior to beginning the study (Approval No. 00056. IRB approval was given to the researcher to conduct the study as it conformed to the university and The Organization's ethical standards.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the method for the study was described and defined. The phenomenological approach assessed the perceptions of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County. The study used one-on-one interviews with community members residing in Westchester County. Participation was voluntary and the Westchester County Department of Health's region and municipality map was used to administer interviews among the six different regions and municipalities. The interview protocol was used in the interviews along with recording and note taking to understand the perceptions of community members through coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis. Most importantly, the Walden University and The Organization IRB approval for the current study was discussed and explained. Chapter 4 discussed the results of the study.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand community members' perception of opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County. The study also sought to understand community members' perceptions of the women who entered these programs. The study included three research questions:

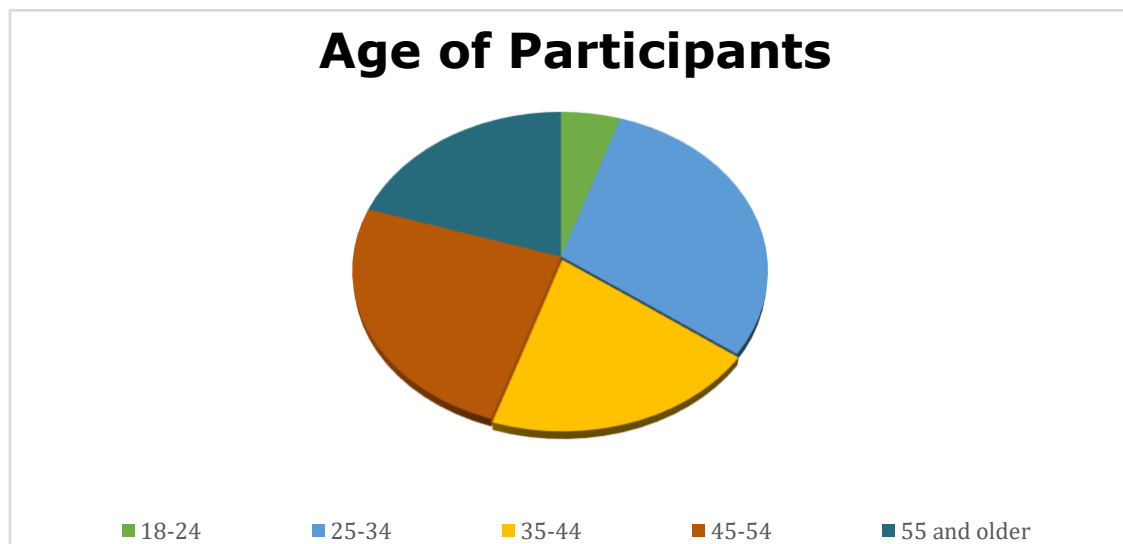
1. How do community members perceive opioid abuse treatment programs within their living areas in Westchester County?
2. How effective do community members view opioid abuse treatment programs in their ability to reduce the number of addictions, crimes, and deaths related to opioid abuse?
3. How do community members perceive individuals who choose to enter the treatment programs?

In this chapter, the results of the study are discussed. The demographics, data collection, and data analysis are explained. The evidence of trustworthiness is examined the results of the phenomenological study are analyzed.

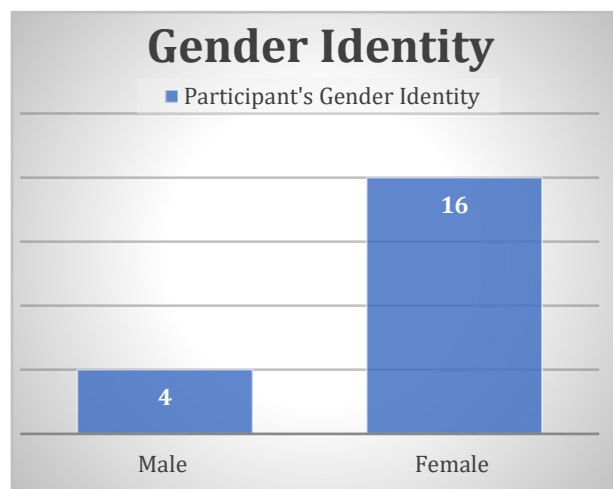
### **Demographics**

Of the 36 responses to the initial questionnaire, only 20 agreed to the in-person interview. However, 20 interviews were completed. The sample included only respondents who had lived in Westchester County for a minimum of 5 years. Each region of the county was accounted for. Ages were recorded on a four-part scale: 18 to 24 years

old, 25 to 34 years old, 45 to 54 years old, and 55 years and older (see Figure 1). Out of the 20 participants, 16 identified as female and four identified as male (see Figure 2).



*Figure 1.* Age of participants.



*Figure 2.* Gender Identification of Participants.

### **Data Collection**

On October 8, 2019, the social media post (see Appendix A) with the link to the initial questionnaire were posted. The post indicated that the study was specific to Westchester County and sought participants 18 years and older who have lived in their locale of Westchester County for a minimum of 5 years. The social media post also indicated what the study was for and the available link for the initial questionnaire. In this questionnaire, the participants were notified that the study itself would involve a face to face interview that would not last more than an hour. It also indicated the researcher would contact the individual if they met the criteria to be a participant in the study. The initial questionnaire (see Appendix B) asked questions to ensure participants met criteria for being at least 18 years old, living in Westchester County for a minimum of 5 years, and naming their locale. Based on the information provided in the initial questionnaire, the researcher contacted the participants to schedule the in-person interview as well as provide the informed consent form. The data collection period ended December 15, 2019, once data saturation and the participant goal were reached.

Each interview was held at The Organization. The Organization was chosen based on its convenience, availability, and confidentiality abilities. As The Organization had its own (IRB) process, the researcher could not begin her study until IRB approval was attained from both Walden University and The Organization. Participants either electronically signed the consent forms or provided the signed copy at the time of the interview. Once at the interview, six main questions from the interview protocol (see Appendix C) were asked in order to understand how community members perceived



opioid abuse treatment programs, women who entered these programs, and the overall nature of their understanding of opioids. The questions were as followed:

1. How do you define an opioid? Can you give an example of such?
2. How would you define a substance abuse treatment program? What about opioid abuse treatment programs?
3. How do you define your role in substance abuse treatment programs as a community member?
4. How effective to you view the policies of the opioid treatment programs in Westchester County?
5. How effective do you think these programs are to reducing opioid abuse?
6. Do you have any recommendations to those who operate the programs on how to better communicate with members within the community?

These six questions were created to understand the lived experiences of the participants as community members of Westchester County.

Each participant consented to being recorded. The interviews were recorded using an Apple iPad as discussed in Chapter 3. This device was only accessed by the researcher and used solely for the study to confirm confidentiality. The apple device was locked away when not in use and password protected. In Chapter 3, the researcher stated the information from the interviews would be sent to the participants to confirm information; however, participants indicated their respective recording would suffice as a means to confirm information provided in their responses. Therefore, participants only received a copy of their informed consent.

## **Data Analysis**

The data collection was analyzed using NVivo 12 for Mac and Microsoft Word. Using Microsoft Word, the interviews were transcribed. The software was then used on the same laptop to help with coding and thematic analysis. The questions asked during the interviews were used to create themes for the overall perspectives of the participants' understanding of opioid treatment programs for women in Westchester County. These codes and themes were created based on the narrative responses to each question.

The interview questions assessed the participants' classification of opioids, perception of programs, effectiveness of programs, and ultimately, the roles of community members. Based on the narrative results, these were then the themes created to effectively answer the study's research questions.

## **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

The research questions and interview protocol were directly based on the literature and used in this phenomenological study to understand the perceptions of community members. This approach fell directly in line with methods employed by other researchers and the questions employed a concise and direct relationship to the literature. This study also received approval from Walden University and The Organization to ensure the study was done credibly and ethically.

### **Transferability**

This study focused specifically on Westchester County; however, due to the information the study focused on, it can easily be transferred to a study in a different

location. For this specific study, the criteria for initial recruitment was broad which allows for transferability as well as adding additional criteria other researchers see fit based on the perceptions they are researching within this field.

### **Dependability**

During the interview process, notes were taken and the interviews were recorded. NVivo software was used to conduct thematic analysis, and Microsoft Word was used for transcriptions and coding based on the software analysis. This data will remain available for 5 years, and at the conclusion of this time period, will be deleted and destroyed to ensure confidentiality.

### **Confirmability**

The results from the study were analyzed, coded, categorized, and themed. This ensured the data remained unbiased by confirming the analysis focused on the results of the participants themselves. Furthermore, direct quotations were used to ensure the information was based on the perceptions of community members. Participants did not receive a copy of the interview as they indicated the recording would suffice as the confirmation.

## **Results**

This study included three research questions that focused on understanding how community members perceived opioid treatment programs and individuals, specifically women, who entered these programs. From these three research questions, six questions were created on the interview protocol to gain more understanding of the lived experiences of these community members. As such, several themes were created based

on the results as followed: classification of opioids, perception of programs, effectiveness of programs, and role of community members. These themes will be discussed in this section.

### **Classification of Opioids**

Of the 20 participants, all 20 were able to define what an opioid was as either a drug, a painkiller medication, or both. With respect to classifying it as being illegal or legal, participants were unsure and unable to give a concrete answer. Participant C defined an opioid as “an addictive, hard narcotic that is a mix of legal and illegal since it can be prescribed by a physician.” Participant H furthered this definition by stating opioids were a “certain class of medication that is used to treat pain conditions that have addictive qualities.” Participant K took an interesting approach to defining and classifying an opioid as a “Catch 22. It is a necessity that has been blown out of proportion and it has been abused.”

Although some participants were able to give more concrete definitions, as demonstrated above, each participant had a base understanding of what an opioid was, how to classify an opioid, and even gave examples. The most common examples were: heroin, prescription drugs, oxycodone, pain killers, Vicodin, morphine, and Percocet. Participant P even stated, “it’s an epidemic in our country and it doesn’t know any class, background, or economic status.” The participants indicated a base understanding of what opioids were so that the researcher could begin questions surrounding the opioid programs themselves.

## **Perception of Programs**

The participants' perceptions and understanding of programs varied. Out of the 20 participants, 17 stated they have heard of substance abuse treatment programs. Out of those 17 participants, none knew of any programs, whether general substance abuse or opioid specific, within their areas or throughout Westchester County. All 20, however, were able to comment on what they perceived to happen within these programs, specifically opioid abuse treatment programs. The majority of the participants perceived these programs to have an array of levels to them for achieved success. Participants noted counseling, therapy, physical training, medication to help with weaning, and rehabilitation as activities that take place while an individual is in treatment. Participants also noted programs could be inpatient or outpatient. Participant C perceived these as "programs organized by private and public entities to treat those who have an addiction and are abusing it and causing problems within their everyday life." Participant E added to this perception by stating, "socializing and having conversations with others who have conquered the things they are looking to conquer."

When it came to opioid abuse treatment programs, participants defined these programs the same as any substance abuse treatment program with focused treatments, individuals suffering from a substance abuse, and professionals within the opioid epidemic. About half of the participants indicated the need for individuals dealing with opioid abuse to go to specific opioid abuse treatment program. As an example, Participant P commented, "When you are going to a mental health provider, you go to the most targeted, specific person you can. You want to find people who are going to finesse

detail in the best way possible.” The other half indicated individuals suffering from opioid abuse should be able to go to any program. This was indicated by Participant G, who indicated “regardless of drug, you will end up in a program and require rehabilitation.” Regardless which side a participant fell on, all participants indicated the need for substance or opioid abuse treatment programs to help those who entered the programs through the various methods. Each participant was able to suggest that the categories mentioned were necessary parts of the programs.

### **Effectiveness of Programs**

Out of the 20 participants, all 20 were unsure of the policies in Westchester County for opioid treatment programs, unsure of the rates the programs had for reducing opioid abuse, and unsure if there was a difference between men and women who use and abuse opioids. The effectiveness of the programs for reducing addictions, crimes, and deaths related to opioid use and abuse was unable to be answered definitively as the participants each indicated they do not have the knowledge or education to accurately answer those questions. Participant F noted their knowledge and awareness in opioid programming but did not know what Westchester County specifically had to offer and if those policies for the programs were effective. Participants did agree on the need to enforce policies if programs wanted to be effective. As with any program with the goal of success, it was important that programs for treatment had policies set in place. Although they were not able to conclusively comment on effectiveness of programs, participants were able to agree that programs and restorative justice was better than jail and other forms of retributive justice. Participant T provided programs are better than jail because

an opioid used as an addiction is a disease. They stated, "Jails are not like what most people think they are. I think you can get as many opioids in a jail as you can outside and/or control an opioid business from jail if you're in jail." Participant R furthered this by adding that once someone was in the system, it was almost impossible to get out. More specifically, Participant C indicated the programs were a good use of tax dollars.

With respect to the perception of individuals who enter the treatment programs, Participant B believed "those who are choosing to enter into these programs must have a desire to seek and get help." With respect to understanding the differences between men and women who used and abused opioids, many participants were unsure if there was a difference and were also unaware if men and women reacted differently. Participant N stated they did not know if men or women patients responded differently when they were using opioids; moreover, Participant P assumed female behavior would cause females to be more discrete with their use and abuse. Participant O furthered this by stating there might be differences due to stress levels, history of abuse, weight, or age, but it was not something they could certainly comment on without knowing more information. Participant Q understood "we are biologically different, but assume it also depends on how much they take and how much they are addicted." Participant S did mention women having more of a need to use opioids if undergoing surgeries such as a cesarean delivery but was not able to confidently give an answer as to there being a difference in dependency in women versus men. Participant R stated they would be surprised if there was a difference between men and women with respect to opioids. Participants were unable to distinguish if there was a difference between men and women; however, did

agree that individuals entering programs were seeking and wanting help and rehabilitation. Furthermore, participants indicated interest in knowing if there was a difference between men and women when it came to opioids and having data available to them regarding this.

Furthermore, all 20 participants indicated their desire to be educated in this topic. Participant S stated programs are “as effective as much as it can be, and then once a patient goes back into their own community and their own home, there has to be outpatient treatment as well. Inpatient, outpatient, working with the family. It’s not just the patient, it’s the whole mixture of the family setting.” Participant D believed having the data available to her would be important because “it impacts [their] kids. Even if [their] kids are not getting involved, [their] friends may be involved and it is always good to know.” Participant D furthered this notion by indicating their need for more data respective to reducing opioid abuse but “heard news stories that they have been better able to control the opioid abuse.” Participants commented on the effectiveness of programs, but none were able to confidently give an answer on its effectiveness.

### **Role of Community Members**

Based on the results of the study, it was evident community members of Westchester County felt close knit and cared about what happened within their community. Participant H reflected on their various living locales and noted having the most family type feeling within their current locale as well as their involvement within Westchester County being the greatest as compared to the other counties they have lived in. Each participant reflected on their joys of living in Westchester County and their



desire to live in a safe and protected community. They also stressed their desire to be part of community initiatives because they felt a connection to their specific locale and Westchester County as a whole.

As safe as the participants felt Westchester County was, the participants also felt that opioids were an issue in Westchester County even if they were not able to give research or data. Participant N stated, “From the news and social media, there is a lot of information out there and I have a feeling there is a big problem because it is so easy to access and depend [on them].” Participant O definitely believed there was an opioid problem in Westchester County and Participant T indicated ‘opioid use is an issue with a capital Y.’ Participant J felt they did not know much about opioids specific to Westchester County, but believed knowing more would change their perception especially because they have children who live, learn, and grow in the area. Participant L furthered this idea by indicating they thought opioid abuse was an issue in Westchester County, but because no one close to them is affected by the epidemic that they knew of, they were unable to know the extent of the problem. Participant L added that if she knew more about resources and what to look out for, then maybe she would notice others around her who struggled from abuse.

An important criterion for understanding how community members perceived opioid treatment programs was to understand how they perceived their role within these programs as a community member. Out of the 20 participants, all agreed that they currently do not have a role within these programs and that they should have, in some way, a role within these programs. Participant P defined the role of community members

like a brotherhood and that working together offered support and a safety net not only for the drug user but also for the family members and the community as a whole. Participant S stated:

These are topics that should not be stigmatized and should be talked about because we are creating the monster. They believed we all have a responsibility in what happens. We all have to watch out for each other and we also have to watch out for our doctors, physicians, and kids in school. When we see something, we have to say something, and people are afraid to say anything.

Participant E had a similar narrative in defining their role within these programs as conflicted; morally, they believed they should have a role; however, social perception indicated that others should not be involved. They strongly believed that the current social perception was what prohibited the individual who wanted help and rehabilitation from receiving that help. Participant F discussed the issue of stigma as well indicating, “I think people are cornered because it can happen to anyone with the increase of prescriptions going to people who may need it and then anybody going into a medicine cabinet.” Participant A believed their role was to be that “nonjudgmental friend to get help and I can do this if I have more information.” They continued reflecting on the role of the community member by stating:

Currently, members do not have a role because there is no real communication happening between the programs and the community. There are no educational forums, meetings, or any type of event [from what they know]. The creation of

community leaders who know more would make a difference in the amount of people who get help.

Participant D wanted to be educated and felt that, as a community member, had a duty to learn and engage. This would define their role in that they would be able to inform others.

Many participants also agreed that roles for community members within these programs should not be a requirement but rather offered should a community member wanted to pursue. Participant G felt “forcing anyone into anything will not make someone want to do it.” Participant R defined their role as a voice: they believed they should be part of the conversation when discussing the location and logistics of the programs themselves, but with respect to the treatments themselves, would leave that to the professionals. The researcher followed up the question by asking if they would want to be a stakeholder, and they said they would. They would be an advocate and this was an issue of growing concern for them especially because they believed they lacked the basic knowledge. Participant H emphasized the need for general education for community members through their narrative, “I believe I interacted with someone within my community who suffers from opioid addiction and I remember wanting to do something about it and feeling helpless.” Their lack of general education, especially around where to find programs and policies, limited their ability to help this individual. Participant G reflected on their occupation and indicated they would be willing to offer free services if approached. As a dental hygienist, they understood the effect drugs may have on the outward appearance and how that could impact perception. By offering free clinics and

working with the programs in place, they believed this would help in a great way to boost confidence and self-esteem while reducing stigmas and negative perceptions.

Regardless of the approach, the participants were of the firm belief they should have roles within these programs. Some roles that participants defined were: supporting initiatives, electing representatives who favor programs that provide a certain amount of community support, understanding policies, and volunteering. Participant F fully believed that “having the data will allow me to better support my community.” They mentioned they had children within the community, and if Westchester County allowed community members to be educated, they would accept and be interested in that education.

Participant I defined their role as being an example to the community and believed the side effects associated with opioids would impact the community as a whole, and in order to help, must be aware of the policies.

As each community member believed they should have a role within the programs and believed they needed more education within the subjects of opioids and programs, the researcher asked the participants to give some examples of how they can receive this communication and education. Participant C reflected on their childhood and the War on Drugs campaign. Although they were not sure if it was really effective in reducing marijuana use, that image was still engrained in their head. Thirty years later, they could still remember that image of a brain versus a brain on drugs. They believed the advertising campaign was effective but insisted that the image of opioids cannot be painted as “drugs are bad” and “not doing drugs is good.” The focus should be on the actual consequences of opioid abuse and why it was bad rather than it be focused on a

political platform of being bad the way they remembered the advertising campaign from their youth. Participant H reflected on their temple and the bathroom stalls. They stated each stall had a message that if you felt you were being controlled by your partner, there was a number to call. They thought this would be a good addition if, instead of focusing on the domestic violence, the message focused on opioid abuse, what to look out for, and how to reach out for resources and support. Participant R believed having data and research readily available was best. They specified, “Have the facts. It can be objective or subjective, so show the pros and cons. What are the benefits? What are the pitfalls? Convenience? Tax break?” Participants S and E both reflected on the D.A.R.E. program and its effectiveness at showcasing the detrimental effects of drinking and driving. Both participants believed this program created emotion because it allowed for open dialogue between professionals in the field, parents, and students alike. Both participants believed having a program such as this one that focused on opioid use and abuse would also allow for an open dialogue that was severely missing.

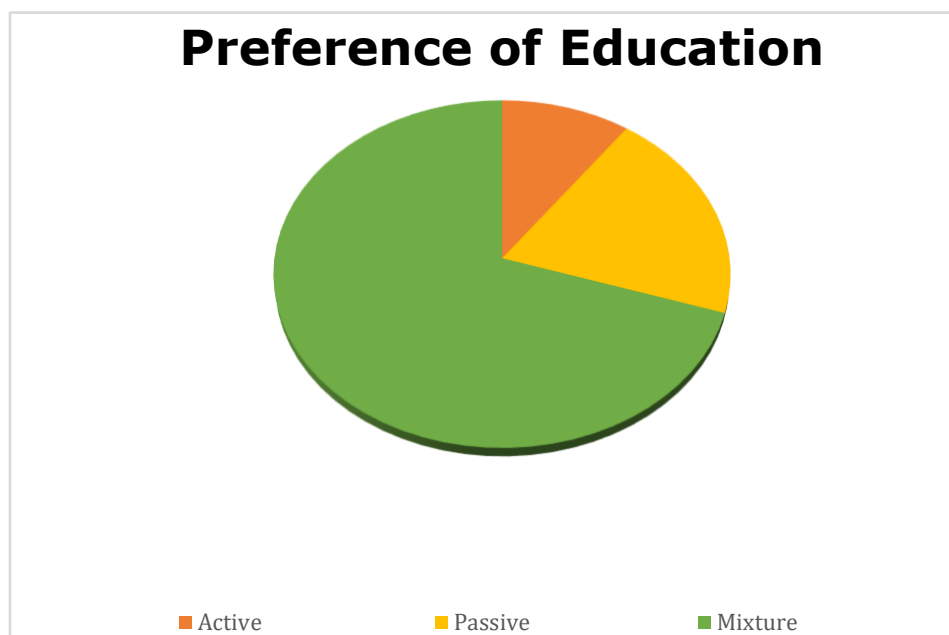
The results from the participants ranged from active education to passive education. The active education included holding in-person educational and training programs, making it part of a curriculum, establishing a learning day such as “opioid addiction awareness day,” and working with organizations, including temples, churches, community centers, and community coalitions. Participant D reflected on needing both active and passive education in order to reach a wide variety of individuals. They believed the researcher needed to be aware that people learn differently and there are multiple types of learners. They stated:

You have to go where the community gathers like senior living, home associations, health fairs, legislators, community information boards, and apartment buildings. We need to know how to recognize the signs, what steps to take without physically talking to the person and knowing the resources... [We also] need to approach in different and multiple times. People hear it and see it multiple times, but we need those multiple times to get it through.

The passive education included commercials, infographs, brochures with visuals that strike emotion, social media, and community emails that went out on a monthly basis showcasing the importance of these issues. Participant E stressed passive education because active education, such as a meeting, would “require limiting expectations because people may say yes but not necessarily show unless there is something for them such as free food which can become expensive.” They understood active education and would appreciate an educational module; however, would prefer something that was available to them on their own time, such as a one-pager that gave the necessary information while creating some kind of emotion and connection. Figure 3 shows the percentages of participants who would prefer active education, passive education, or a mixture of both.

Regardless of which method participants thought best to reach community members such as themselves, they all agreed that the information cannot be overwhelming. All participants believed in the importance of having a role within these programs, education and information regarding opioids, and helping individuals who are seeking resources and rehabilitation; however, all participants also agreed that the

education and communication must be repetitive and must reach the community in a smart and underwhelming method. Participant E believed that if the education was too much, the members would “check out.” The participants understood they were not professionals within the field; however, they understood they needed more information and were willing to receive and inform others regarding these topics if given the opportunity to receive that information. The participants also discussed that regardless of what their preference was, it would be important for the information going out to go out in the best way possible. It would be important to determine what works and what does not when it came to giving out the information; however, it was very important that the information be consistently displayed, spoken about, and made available.



*Figure 3.* Preference of education for participants.

## Summary

In this chapter, the researcher discussed the results of the phenomenological portion of the study. A total of 36 participants answered the initial questionnaire and 20 participants completed the in-person interview. There were three research questions and six interview protocol questions. Themes were developed based on the transcription, coding, and analysis of the interviews. The important themes created from this study were: classification of opioids, perception of programs, effectiveness of programs, and role of community members. All participants were able to classify an opioid as a drug and/or a pain killer while only some of the participants had heard of or knew of treatment programs. Regardless of knowing where a treatment program was located, all participants stated their perceptions of these programs and what the programs entailed. All participants indicated their inability to comment on the effectiveness of the policies and the programs' abilities to reduce addictions, crimes, and deaths related to opioid abuse; they also stated the importance of having that information available to them. Participants were unable to define distinct differences between men and women when it came to opioid use and abuse; however, believed all individuals who entered these programs did seek resources and rehabilitation. Lastly, all participants believed they did not then have a role within these programs but perceived that they should have a role. All participants agreed this topic is of interest to them and realized they needed to do more to help; however, they did not have the educational materials or resources to offer that help. Each participant defined themselves as a community member in Westchester County and expressed their desire to learn and help more if the materials were provided to them.



In the next chapter, there will be a discussion of the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications of the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand community members' perception of opioid abuse treatment programs that help reduce opioid abuse and dependency for women in Westchester County. Additionally, this study sought to understand the perceptions community members had of women who entered these programs. The study focused on the lived experiences of community members and their understanding of opioids, opioid abuse treatment programs, and women who used and abused them. The perceptions and understandings of community members were obtained through one-on-one interviews. According to the results, community members were able to define opioids and treatment programs; however, they were unable to provide accurate information about the effectiveness of the programs due to a lack of knowledge on these programs, education, and research. Participants did not know if there was a difference between men and women who use and abuse opioids; however, they were in agreement that those who entered the programs did so for rehabilitation and to receive resources. The results further indicated that community members wanted to have roles within the treatment programs, whether as a volunteer or advocate. Results also indicated community members' desire to learn more in order to better support their communities and those dealing with opioid abuse.

This chapter covers the following topics: the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications for positive social change.

### **Interpretation of the Study**

Chapter 2 discussed the prevalence of opioid dependency in Westchester County. The New York State Senate Majority Coalition, along with the Heroin and Opioid Task Force, developed four steps for successful reduction of substance abuse: prevention, treatment, recovery, and enforcement (NY Senate, 2016). While all this was confirmed by the results of this study, an additional step should be added: education. Community members stressed their desire to learn more and to become advocates; however, were unsure where to start. Adding this step could greatly impact these treatment programs as it would allow for the ability for advocacy from community members. The literature review also discussed the patterns of opioid use and dependency (NYS Health Foundation, n.d.); participants were not able to expand on this knowledge nor were participants able to contribute to understanding data patterns of opioid abuse but did note opioid use, abuse, and dependency was a problem in Westchester County.

As discussed in Chapter 2, effective treatment programs should be efficient, professional, and engaging (Fields, Knudsen, & Roman, 2016). Settumba, Chambers, Shanahan, Schofield, and Butler (2017) examined the cost-effectiveness of substance abuse treatment programs as compared to incarceration and concluded that substance abuse treatment programs were be more cost-effective than incarceration. Anderson, Reinsmith-Jones, Brooks, and Langsam (2017) discussed the understanding that public policy makers, criminal justice practitioners, and the general public had towards treatment rather than punishment in terms of drug abuse. This was directly confirmed by the participants as they discussed the need for professionals, counseling, therapy, and

group work. Although the participants did not directly state efficiency and engaging as necessary for success, they did discuss various perceptions within these treatment programs and those perceptions resulted in the need for professionals within the opioid epidemic, the need to have inpatient and outpatient capabilities, and the need for engagement through counseling, therapy, and groupwork. Although only one participant mentioned the belief that programs are a good use of tax dollars, all participants agreed that rehabilitation was best as compared to jail sentences when dealing with opioid abuse. The participants acknowledged that if a crime was committed, then the abuser should face a jail sentence; however, regardless of a jail sentence or not, the opioid abusers did need to have access to rehabilitation as the addiction was a disease.

The peer-reviewed literature discussed and confirmed gender disparities related to opioid abuse. The literature reviewed noted women as being more sensitive to pain, being placed at higher risks due to pregnancy, and more likely to be prescribed opioids by healthcare professionals (Koons et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2017). Koons et al. (2018) also noted the rates for opioid abuse for women as more dramatic compared to men. These findings within the literature review could not be confirmed in this study as participants were unable to positively note a difference between men and women when dealing with opioid use and abuse other than being biologically different.

Chapter 2 also discussed the role stigma played within drug abuse. The results indicated how individuals perceived others to label them greatly determined their need to enter a program (Booth, Stewart, Curran, Cheney, & Borders, 2014). This was confirmed by the participants' understanding and perception of substance abuse programs. Many

participants touched upon the idea of stigma and the need to destigmatize the topic because it caused individuals to not seek help. The social perception of stigmatization hindered the ability for those needing help to seek that help or to ask for help locating resources if unsure. Kennedy et al. (2017) noted no significant differences among race, income, and geographical location in their study focused on perception of stigma as related to prescription opioid disorder. Just as important, this study saw no significant differences among geographical regions within Westchester County when it came to the participants' understanding and explanation of stigma. It is inconclusive in this study if there was a significant difference among race or income as these were not criteria measured in this study.

The research from Chapter 2 focused on understanding roles of community members within these treatment programs which indicated the lack of research within this area to understand how community members perceived these programs (Tracy & Wallace, 2016). The results from this study added more information within this area. The results indicated community members would like a role within these programs and many would define that role as a responsibility to the community; however, community members also indicated the lack of awareness and education they had in order to offer that role. Community members extended this knowledge to the researcher by also providing recommendations which they believe would benefit themselves and other community members to receive that knowledge that they lacked.

The theoretical framework used for this study was social labeling theory. This theory defined labels which created stigma with negative implications through societal

norms and culture (Gunnar Bernburg, 2009). Thus, this theory, with respect to community members, stated that community members who labeled individuals as drug users or addicts can negatively affect the individual and her desire to get help. Based on the results of the study, community members believed they currently do not have roles within the programs but desired to have a role created for them whether it be through advocacy, volunteering, or general education. The results indicated the participants' lack of knowledge regarding resources, policies, and logistics of opioid programs directly impacted their ability to help others. Community members also realized the social perception of opioid use and abuse greatly stigmatized anyone with desire to ask for help and get rehabilitation. This forthrightly confirmed how the theoretical framework of social labeling theory can either negatively or positively impact opioid user and abusers. The results indicated the perceptions of treatment programs to be overall positive while the role of community members to be undistinguishable. This missing link of community members within these programs thus limited their capabilities to fully understand opioids, treatment programs, and women who used and abused. Consequently, this limited capability hindered community members to accurately label drug users and abusers, inform others, and offer available resources within Westchester County.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

The delimitations of this study were guided by the research questions, sample population, theoretical framework, and significance. The goal of this study was to understand the perceptions of community members in Westchester County relating to opioid abuse treatment programs for women within Westchester County, New York, and

as such, the research questions solely focused on this topic. Research questions allowed for narrative between the researcher and participants to understand perceptions of opioids, treatment programs, and women who used and abused opioids. Questions were not asked regarding use of opioids or to specifically name individuals who dealt with opioid abuse. The sample population was taken from Westchester County, New York and the theoretical framework chosen was social labeling theory. Due to this, generalizability would not be guaranteed due to the specific nature of the sample population, experimental design, and theoretical framework. Lastly, the significance of this study was to add literature to an area highly lacking, and as such, allow for change in policy and practice. Because of this, the significance of this study is focused on the specific population chosen within the specific research design.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were a number of limitations to this study. Data collection focused solely on Westchester County. The focus on just this county demonstrated it could not be used to generalize other counties within the surrounding area. Furthermore, as this was a qualitative, phenomenological design, the sample size of 20 was low. Although data saturation was met and the results were full of narrative from those participants, the results cannot be generalizable for all persons of Westchester County due to the density of population within this county.

The initial questionnaire was very broad as the criteria to enter into the study was based on the participants being 18 years and older and living within Westchester County for a minimum of 5 years. Although the criteria was purposely left broad by the

researcher for the base of her study, the broadness greatly limited the ability to classify participants by anything other than identified sex and age.

The recruitment for this study was also only done through social media. Although the researcher was able to use various modes of social media, she understood not all persons who may meet criteria had access to social media. Furthermore, the location of choice to conduct the study was also a limitation. Although the researcher ensured convenience and confidentiality with the location, it may have negatively affected the response rate of the participants moving from the initial questionnaire to scheduling the interview.

The study's main focus was on understanding community members' perception of opioids, treatment programs, and women who used and abused opioids. As such, there was an assumption that there would be a lack of knowledge toward understanding this topic as prior education was not a criterion. The study did not focus on whether an individual was immersed in the field and knowledge of the topic of opioid abuse. The results, therefore, were inherently limited based on the level of understanding each participant and to the extent to which they delved into their narrative. Furthermore, as questions were not asked regarding personal use of opioids or relationship to any opioid abuser, the researcher was not able to reflect participants' extent of knowledge as a relationship to being involved in some way to the opioids.

Lastly, there was an inherent bias of the researcher due to her residence in Westchester County. This bias was alleviated by the researcher indicating to participants



of her residence in Westchester County prior to the interviews beginning and by using the narratives and responses given by the participants to guide the results of the study.

### **Recommendations**

In this study, a sample of participants who were community members in Westchester County were interviewed to understand perceptions of opioids, treatment programs, and women who used and abused opioids. The basis of this study was due to the lack of research within this area. Future researchers should continue the research by studying more individuals who are community members to better understand their role within the opioid crisis. This study's population should be used as a beginning point to stress the necessity to study this sample population's depth, relationship, and understanding within the opioid epidemic. Furthermore, this study included all of Westchester County; however, future researchers may find it beneficial to study each region or municipality separately. This study also included age ranges in this study; however, future researchers may find it beneficial to use age as a criterion to determine if age creates a distinction when it comes to perceptions of opioids and treatment programs. These breakdowns would allow for expanded research and an ability to correlate and understand patterns throughout the various regions and municipalities in Westchester County as related to the opioid epidemic. These correlations may prove valuable with respect to policy making. These various breakdowns would also allow for statistical analyses or even mix-method studies to be conducted in the future.

In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach. This approach allowed the researcher to gain knowledge into the lived experiences of

community members and their perceptions of opioids and treatment programs. Future researchers should use the information provided in these results to create a survey or other quantitative method to reach more participants and grow the sample size. Doing this would allow for correlations, generalized results, and the possibility for longitudinal testing.

Future researchers should also explore other methods of understanding community member's perception of opioid abuse treatment programs by looking at other categories other than the ones this study looked at such as: understanding differences between inpatient and outpatient programs. The more research that can be done within the community member sector of this topic would greatly impact the field.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

With the increased focus placed on opioids, the need for more education and awareness around these issues is essential. As demonstrated by Chapter 2, there was a lack of research understanding how peers or community members perceived treatment programs and their support for them or lack thereof. The literature review also indicated this avenue was promising in terms of increased support and awareness. This study added to that lacking research by studying a group that had been overlooked time and time again within the opioid epidemic. The findings of this study can be used by legislators, policy makers, and criminal justice professionals to renovate current substance abuse, specifically opioid abuse, programs. This renovation would allow for community members to be part of the programs by being informed, educated, knowledgeable, stakeholders, and fully part of the community. Increasing public policy to include

community members as stakeholders would greatly improve policies and education related to opioid abuse and treatment programs.

Within Westchester County, this study will be useful for the Department of Health to develop community specific approaches to these issues. The researcher hopes the Westchester County Department of Health will take the results of this study to expand on their efforts. Additionally, the participants themselves offered recommendations on how they would understand and intercept any and all information related to opioids. It would be helpful to the Department of Health to analyze these recommendations so that community members are invited and desire to participate in being part of the resolution for opioid reduction rather than feeling helpless or part of the problem. As this is a group that has limited research, taking recommendations offered by community members who reside in Westchester County and care for their community would be a start to increasing overall knowledge and awareness.

As stated by the participants, local representation and advocacy may impact a participant's vote. It would be important for this research to also be addressed by the Westchester County Board of Legislators. This organization is made up of representatives for all regions and municipalities of Westchester County. As representatives of Westchester County, they play an immeasurable role in the creation and dissemination of policies and legislations throughout Westchester County. The results of this study will hopefully be useful for the district leaders to update policies and be more inclusive and understanding towards opioids and treatment programs. The reduction of stigma is vital to improving the success of the programs and the knowledge of community members,

and that reduction begins with the district leaders. If the district leaders are able to understand the importance of the issues discussed in this study, they will be able to pass that knowledge onto their districts and reduce the stigmatization associated with opioids, treatment programs, and opioid users and abusers.

The theoretical framework used for this study was appropriate and demonstrated the pronounced role labeling plays within the opioid epidemic. Currently, that labeling negatively impacts the opioid abuser and the community alike. By taking the results of this study and creating a plan focused on community engagement and education, that labeling of an opioid user could be better understood, and in turn, positively impact the opioid user and the community. This theoretical framework is essential when studying opioids as many community members understand the importance of programs and rehabilitation; however, are unsure of its effectiveness and do not feel part of the process. Continued study and use of this framework can greatly impact the communities within Westchester County as well as the Department of Health's ability to work towards successful reduction of opioid abuse.

### **Areas for Future Research**

This study focused on a topic that has been widely researched using a population that has not. Literature and research stressed the necessity for an understanding of opioid use and abuse; however, research lacked within the area of understanding community members. Although this study is able to contribute to the literature, more research needs to be done on the community member. More research must be done on defining what a community member is, what role a community member has in the process, and

understanding the impact of these community members. Research needs to continue developing in this field as community members want to contribute to support as discussed in this study. Research indicated the necessity to reduce opioid abuse; however, without more research in populations that are lacking, there is no definitive method toward that much needed reduction.

Another area of future research would be on the individuals entering these programs and the staff employed in these programs and their perceptions of community members. As important as it is for a study like this one with a focus on community members, it is just as important for the individuals who are professionals within the field are researched to determine their perception of community members within the opioid programs. It would also be important to understand the perception of opioid abusers regarding community members. These additional research topics could then work together for better implementation of community members and overall stigma reduction. By studying these various populations and determining perceptions and recommendations, policy makers, professionals, and lawmakers would be more equipped to work towards reduction in dependency and overall use of opioid use.

### **Summary**

This study was conducted to understand community members' perception of opioid treatment programs for women in Westchester County. A phenomenological approach with one-on-one interviews was chosen to better understand the lived experiences of community members related to this study. The data showed the overall classifications participants were able to provide regarding opioids, the inability of

participants to accurately interpret effectiveness of these programs, and the desire for participants to hold a role within these programs whether it be through volunteering, advocacy, or general education. The themes created from the results were: classification of opioids, perception of programs, effectiveness of programs, and the role of community members. The data supported the theoretical framework of social labeling theory as it related to opioid abuse and treatment programs.

This research study discovered that, although not professionals in the field, community members do have a fundamental understanding of opioids. This research study also determined that community members do believe and see the value of treatment programs but do not have enough information on those programs to determine effectiveness. Lastly, this research study indicated the role community members do not have within the programs but collectively all agreed should exist. Community members ended their interviews by discussing recommendations they saw fit to reach out to the community and educate its members. The results of this study indicated a change in Westchester County policies for opioid treatment programs must happen so that community members become stakeholders and are aware of what the programs entail and the resources available. The results also indicated community members wish to have more information and education within this field but are unsure where to receive that education, so Westchester County must evaluate its ability to disseminate information to the general public.

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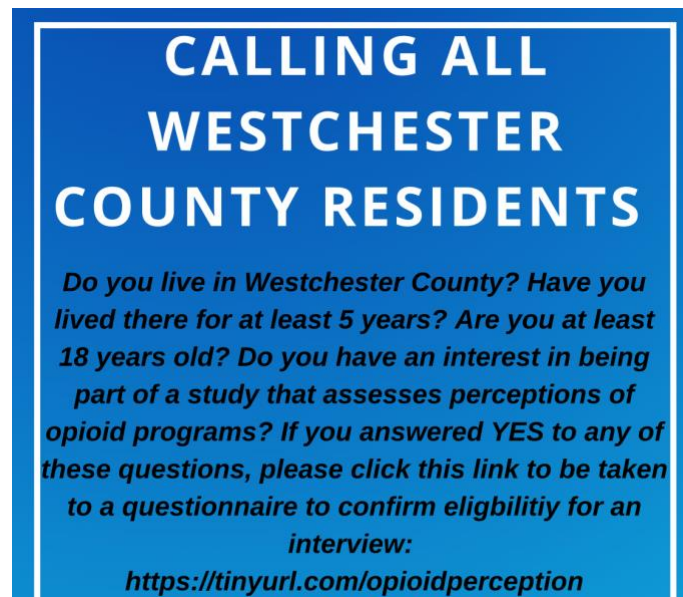
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## Appendix A: Recruitment Post

Hello,

I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Walden University. I am conducting a research study to understand the perception of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County. The purpose of this post is to seek community members who currently live in Westchester County for a minimum of 5 years and is at least 18 years of age to participate in a one-one-one, in person interview. The interview will solely focus on the participant's perception of opioid abuse and understanding of substance abuse treatment programs. The interview will not question a participant's use of any form of opioid. The interview should last no more than 1 hour. Participation in this study will be completely voluntary and all responses will remain confidential. If you are interested in participating in the research study, please click on the link to be given more information and schedule an interview directly with the researcher: Link will be added here.

Thank you for your time and concern.



**CALLING ALL  
WESTCHESTER  
COUNTY RESIDENTS**

*Do you live in Westchester County? Have you lived there for at least 5 years? Are you at least 18 years old? Do you have an interest in being part of a study that assesses perceptions of opioid programs? If you answered YES to any of these questions, please click this link to be taken to a questionnaire to confirm eligibility for an interview:*

*<https://tinyurl.com/opioidperception>*

## Appendix B: Recruitment Questionnaire

I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Walden University. I am conducting a research study to understand the perception of community members toward opioid abuse treatment programs for women in Westchester County. The purpose of this questionnaire is to seek community members who currently live in Westchester County to participate in a one-on-one, in-person interview. The interview will solely focus on the participant's perception of opioid abuse and understanding of substance abuse treatment programs. The interview will not question a participant's use of any form of opioid. The interview should last no more than 1 hour. Participation in this study will be completely voluntary and all responses will remain confidential. If you are interested in participating in the research study, please fill out this questionnaire so that the researcher can contact you directly.

Thank you for your time and concern,

1. Do you currently live in Westchester County?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. Which municipality in Westchester County do you reside?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Have you lived in Westchester County for at least 5 years?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
4. Are you at least 18 years old?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
5. Please provide your contact information so the researcher can schedule an interview.  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email Address OR Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*All information will remain confidential\*\*\*\*\*

## Appendix C: Qualitative Interview Protocol

Understanding Community Members' Perception of Opioid Treatment Programs  
for Women in Westchester County

## Recorded Interview Protocol

*Start Recording*

This is a Walden University Doctoral Student; I am the interviewer for today's interview. This date it \_\_\_\_\_ and the time is \_\_\_\_\_. The interview is taking place at \_\_\_\_\_.

I am currently with the interviewee.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age Range: 18-24  
25-34  
35-44  
44-54  
55 and older

Sex: \_\_\_\_\_

Residential Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Years at Residential Location: \_\_\_\_\_

*Sir/Miss*, this interview is voluntary. You are free to participate or not participate. The researcher will treat you differently if you decide not to participate in the study. If you decide to participate in the study, you can still change your mind and stop at any time. Do you understand that this interview is voluntary and wish to participate? *Yes/No*.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. During the interview, I will ask you several questions to understand how you perceive opioid abuse treatment programs as a community member. Please answer the following questions as truthfully and fully as possible. If there is a question that you do not wish to respond to, please advise me that you would rather not answer the question. The interview should take no longer than 45 minutes.

Main and follow-up interview questions:

1. How do you define an opioid? Can you give an example of such?
2. How would you define a substance abuse treatment program? What about opioid abuse treatment programs?
3. How do you define your role in substance abuse treatment programs as a community member?

4. How effective do you view the policies of the opioid treatment programs in Westchester County?
5. How effective do you think these programs are to reducing opioid abuse?
6. Do you have any recommendations to those who operate the programs on how to better communicate with members within the community?

I would like to thank you for participating in this study. Questions related to this interview or the study can be forwarded to the researcher or researcher's dissertation chair.