Against the Odds: Desistance and Resilient Reintegration

among Formerly Incarcerated Black Men

A Dissertation Submitted by

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Abstract

Black men’s disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system is well documented. Existing research uses quantitative data emphasizing the risks of incarceration and subsequent recidivism. What is lacking in current literature is the exploration of criminal desistance, the process by which a person ceases offending, among formerly incarcerated Black men.

Employing a phenomenological research design using transcendental data analysis procedures, the purpose of this study was to explore how formerly incarcerated Black men understand their desistance from crime. The aim was to identify the ‘what and how’ of their lived experiences that facilitated desistance among this population. The study’s conceptual framework applied several theories and perspectives: critical race theory; intersectionality; resilience theory; and the strengths perspective.

The emphasis of this study was to capture the common lived experiences with criminal desistance among study participants. Eleven individuals who met specific criteria for involvement (i.e. having desisted from crime for five or more years; not on community supervision; no open, unresolved charges) engaged in face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and data analyzed using the qualitative software, Hyper Research. Findings reflect the essential characteristics of a transcendental phenomenological approach: textural, what participants’ experienced in their process to desist; and structural, how participants desisted and reintegrated, despite multiple risk factors.

Findings aligned with existing knowledge about individual and environmental risk factors that make the reintegration process challenging. Study results also elucidated
protective factors illustrating resilience and strengths among this population. These factors supported the emergence of the concept resilient reintegration, a gradual process of desisting from crime leading to successful reintegration with family, community, and society. Study implications outline directions for future research, informing social work education, direct practice, and policy.

Key words: Black men, crime, desistance, resilient, reintegration, phenomenological research
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_Your beginnings will seem humble, so prosperous will your future be._ – _Job 8:7_

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_The best is yet to come._
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Chapter I
Introduction
Introduction

This research study provided a qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated adult Black men. Employing a transcendental phenomenological approach, this study centered on exploring the phenomenon of criminal desistance among adult Black men; who after release from a correctional facility, without any ongoing mandatory supervision (parole or probation), have been successful in staying out of prison, gaining both a structural, the ‘what’, and textural, the ‘how’, description about their ability to desist. A population deemed as “endangered” (Shaw, 2012), Black males, juveniles and adults alike, are disproportionately represented in arrests, convictions, incarcerations, and recidivism within the US criminal justice system. There is significant scholarly literature available to support this perspective, clearly illustrating and outlining the many factors that contribute to formerly incarcerated Black males being a population considered at high risk for failure. In contrast, very limited research has been conducted to explore and identify protective factors among this group, along with what and how, these influences contribute to their ability to be resilient.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore how formerly incarcerated Black men understand their desistance from crime. In the last two decades, rates of incarceration in the United States have escalated dramatically. For Black males in particular, rates of incarceration nation-wide are staggering. Statistics reported

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1 Within this study, the terms ‘Black’ and ‘African American’ are used interchangeably. The researcher respectfully acknowledges that ‘African American’ may be more indicative of an individual born in the US and of African ancestry; while ‘Black’, also inclusive of this definition, is more representative of an individual’s skin color and includes a diverse group of nationalities.
translate into nearly 1 in 3 Black men expected to be imprisoned at some point in their lifetime (Pettit & Western, 2004; Smith & Hattery, 2006; Smith & Hattery, 2010). The incarceration of Black males, and their subsequent recidivism, re-offending typically within three years of release from prison or probation, is well documented (The Sentencing Project, 2010; Pew Center on the States, 2011). In stark contrast, there is insufficient knowledge about what keeps this population from returning to prison. The intent of this phenomenological research was to explore how these men have stayed out of prison and what has contributed to their success.

There is a profusion of literature available on African American males and their involvement with the criminal justice system (Burris-Kitchen & Burris, 2011; Butler, 2011; Califano, Jr., 2010; Christian & Thomas, 2009; Mauer, 2004). The antithesis to this primary discourse is the paucity of information available on the ability of previously incarcerated Black men to stay out of prison. The multiple risk factors encountered once released from prison are evidenced by the high recidivism rate among this population (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005; Smith & Hattery, 2010). Multiple structural disadvantages such as inadequate education, unemployment, housing, and insufficient family and social networks upon release are illustrated as risk factors that contribute to the likeliness of one re-offending and returning to prison (Pew Center on the States, 2011).

This research was positioned within the theoretical framework of resilience and the strengths perspective (Greene, 2006; Saleebey, 2009). Research with the central focus of identifying individual, interpersonal, and environmental strengths and traits of resiliency that encourage desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men is warranted given their over-
representation in (e.g. prison) or connection with (e.g. probation and/or parole) the criminal justice system.

This study was also influenced by critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality. Rooted in Black feminist theory, critical race theory (CRT) examines race within the context of the judicial system (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Delgado & Stefancic, 2007; Freeman, 2011), providing a theoretical paradigm through which to consider the disproportionality of Black males in the criminal justice system. Intersectionality highlights the connection between social identities while being intentionally cognizant of the many institutional structures that create, shape, and maintain a person’s multifaceted identity. Additionally, this theoretical lens gives primacy to the intersection between race, class, and gender (Dottolo & Stewart, 2008; Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009). The context and interaction of these intertwined identities and how these have influenced the ability of formerly incarcerated Black men to successfully desist crime was explored.

This research study theorized that despite the marginalized complex identity associated with being labeled an ex-offender, formerly incarcerated Black men are able to disrupt or even avoid, the cycle of recidivism and not return to prison. There are a multitude of disadvantages this population will encounter. The most common barrier this group must deal with is that of the triumvirate of discrimination: being black, male, and formerly incarcerated (Alexander, 2010). In order to access any supportive services, more often than not, this population is required to disclose race, gender, and conviction status. Yet, despite this, there are those who overcome these obstacles and do not return to prison.

Within the last decade, an evolving concept that has gained increased awareness in the criminology literature is that of desistance, the process by which a person no longer
A limited amount of desistance literature has concentrated specifically on the experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men who have not returned to a correctional setting. Exploration of this phenomenon among Black men is clearly warranted given their distinct overrepresentation in incarceration and recidivism data. Identifying characteristics of resilience and protective factors among this population attends not only to the current chasm in the recidivism and desistance literature about their success in staying out of prison, but also serves as a response to uncover structural disadvantages and encounters with institutional racism, as evidenced by data supporting mass incarceration and the cycle of systemic injustice that perpetually impacts this population (Alexander, 2010; Mauer & King, 2007).

**Research Question**

The research question for this inquiry was: How do formerly incarcerated Black men understand their desistance from crime? The anticipated immediate benefits of these shared experiences were to:

- provide beginning knowledge about the experience of desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men; and
- identify internal and external factors that promote desistance among this population.

Potential future benefits of study findings may:

- contribute to developing practice intervention initiatives (Kazemian, 2007) specifically for this population given their disproportionate representation in the correctional system and recidivism population; and
- espouse the construction of an alternative discourse about formerly incarcerated Black men; one of being rehabilitated, contributing members of society.
This study utilized a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology underscores the “universal essence” (Cresswell, 2007, p.58) as experienced by a group. The rich description provided by participants emphasized the “what” and “how” about their lived experience of desistance. It was important to capture and document the experiences of this population and their perspective of why they have not returned to prison. Although not specific to the incarcerated population, Rich (2009), a physician who worked primarily with the Black male population in Boston, writes about trauma and violence in the lives of African American young men. Nineteen times more likely to die by homicide than their white counterpart, Rich (2009) underscores the devastating impact of trauma, how it manifests (i.e. depression, anxiety, substance use), and the absence of Black men’s experiences and perspective in the current research. “Without any access to their voices, we could easily formulate solutions that are out of sync since with the realities of their lives. Without hearing their stories, we lose sight of the young men who hold real hope for the future. This is why hearing their stories told through their own words are important. Now is the right time to hear the clear resonance of their voices and involve them as central participants in formulating the solutions” (p.xv - xvii).

As noted by Delgado & Stefancic (2007), voices of a marginalized group can be powerful in recounting lived experiences impacted by dynamics of power and privilege. Morgan (2000) notes how the power of sharing one’s narrative, lived experiences that are meaningful and woven together as stories, can be seen as empowering to a marginalized and stigmatized population (e.g. individuals who have been incarcerated). Willingham (2011) highlights how sharing their experiences have been empowering for current and formerly incarcerated African American women. “Their stories fracture the stereotypical images of all
women behind bars and reveal the mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, and friends who are often forgotten once the iron bars close. Their stories help us to see them as they are now, not defined by their crimes or past” (Willingham, 2011, 57).

**Relevance of Research to Social Work Profession**

It is important to state the relevance of this research study to the social work profession and literature, given the limited scholarship available within this body of knowledge. Since its formation in the late 19th century, the social work profession was influentially involved with the criminal justice system, with particular attention to the juvenile population (Reamer, 2004). Reamer (2004) provides a historical review of the profession’s roots and relationship within the criminal justice field and how over the last thirty years it has become increasingly estranged from its initial origin and association with this discipline.

Social work and social work practice are currently recognized as critical components of the criminal and juvenile justice systems (NASW, 2010). However, the profession’s lack of present-day involvement with influencing criminal justice policies and leadership with organizing psychosocial service delivery to this population has been acknowledged as a crucial gap to bridge (NASW, 2010). Cnaan, Draine, Frazier, and Sinha (2008) succinctly state what the profession’s role and responsibility to the formerly incarcerated population should be:

“The social work profession should defend, support, and facilitate the fuller participation of the most marginalized populations in society. In this era, the social work profession must embrace the growing population of ex-prisoners by advocating on their behalf, educating society of their unique needs and challenges, and developing appropriately coordinated, relevant, and accessible programs to assist their successful reintegration into families, communities, sustainable living-wage employment, and civic duties” (p.193-194).
Pettus-Davis (2012) also provides an imperative reminder to the profession of the need to be actively engaged, highlighting the intersections between social work and criminal justice. The disproportionate representation of disadvantaged and vulnerable populations involved with the criminal justice system mandates the profession’s presence, particularly through active, action-based research (Pettus-Davis, 2012). This qualitative research study supports the research agenda outlined by Pettus-Davis (2012) with specific attention to psychosocial research. This phenomenological study focused on identifying protective factors for adults that mitigate involvement in the criminal justice system in the present of risk factors. Additionally, implications to social justice for the formerly incarcerated population, “the assault…evident by the intersection of race, social disadvantage…and criminal involvement” (Pettus-Davis, 2012, p.7) compellingly supports the call for the profession’s involvement and action, as well as the contributions the findings of this research add to the social work literature.

Given its historical influence and experience, and core value of commitment to empowerment for those who are oppressed and combatting social injustice, the social work profession is being invited as an authoritative collaborator and voice in these processes. “Social work is being asked to adapt to the evolving changes in the country’s philosophy on the best ways to balance the sometimes conflicted dichotomy between the need for public safety and the need to address the bio-psychosocial needs of offenders” (NASW, 2010, p.2). Pettus-Davis (2012) resoundingly agrees with this request for engagement stating, “the time [for social work] to do more is now, and we should do more” (p.8). The theoretical contexts
discussed in this research study, all of which exhibit concepts salient to social work, contribute to this explicit call for action.

In response to this invitation to identify and address the needs of the formerly incarcerated population, keeping true to the professional core value of social justice, this research centered on Black men given their overrepresentation among this group. As a context through which to further understand the research question that was explored, a comprehensive review of relevant literature was completed, including strengths and limitations of the current body of work available on desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men. The conceptual framework, through which this qualitative inquiry was constructed, is reviewed. Study design, recruitment processes, methods for data collection and analysis, are outlined. Lastly, a textural “what” and structural “how” description (Cresswell, 2007) of study findings are reviewed followed by a succinct discussion highlighting contributions to the current literature and implications for future research.
Chapter II

Literature Review
Background and Significance

Within the context of crime, the experiences of African Americans are well documented (Burris-Kitchen & Burris, 2011; Butler, 2010; Christian & Thomas, 2009; Johnson, 2000; Muhammad, 2011; Smith & Hattery, 2010) Burris-Kitchen & Burris (2011) and Butler (2011) provide a comprehensive and succinct review of the Black experience through relevant historical time periods: slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, segregation, and the war on drugs. This chronology denotes social and political forces that have had significant impact on the social construction of the African American identity in today’s society, most specifically the criminalizing of Blacks, particularly Black men.

Review of the literature further highlights the multiplicity of disparities (e.g. access to affordable housing and higher education; securing employment) experienced by Blacks, reflecting the heightened degree to which this problem of incarceration among Blacks has escalated in today’s society. The underlying assumption being, that even in this age of presumed color-blindness (Alexander, 2010; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Freeman, 2011) with major triumphs achieved through the civil rights movement and electing an individual who identifies as African American as president of the United States, racial injustices continue to plague this segment of today’s population (Butler, 2010).

Butler (2010) reinforces what should be of grave concern for Black males “…more black men in the criminal justice system now…than were slaves in 1850” (p.1047). Research continues to be conducted that acknowledges and reiterates what is already well established; the discriminatory practices (e.g. mandatory minimum sentencing legislation; stop and frisk policies; racial profiling) that continue to plague the nation’s criminal justice system (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2009; New York Civil Liberties Union, 2009; The Leadership
Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2011). Alexander (2010) and Burris-Kitchen & Burris (2011) describe colonial laws instituted and upheld during slavery and post-slavery eras that not only parallels legislation employed today, but also marks the initiation of the linkage between race and crime. For example, Slave Codes and Black Codes “denied …the right to vote, go to school, own property, travel…work at a print shop” (Burris-Kitchen & Burris, 2011, p.4).

In her highly acclaimed work, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Alexander (2010) examines the history of race in America and the systemic ways in which the legacy of slavery and racism remains pervasive in today’s society, with particular impact to the criminal justice system. This, Alexander (2010) notes, is suggestive of a racial caste system. “African Americans repeatedly have been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but then are reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time,” (p.21). Alexander (2010) discusses how post slavery laws, the birth of Jim Crow, facilitated the overzealous enforcement of laws against Blacks. This overzealousness remains very present in current law enforcement practices. For example, in a report compiled by the Center for Constitutional Rights (2009) it was found that the New York City Police Department disproportionately stopped, questioned, and frisked individuals of color. Between 2005 and 2008, 80% of their total stop and frisks were Blacks (and Latinos), with only 10% of stops being White.

Very similar legislative restrictions are enforced today. In the 1980’s, then President Reagan initiated the *1984 Omnibus Crime Control Bill* that initiated mandatory minimum sentencing practices. Most notably from this legislation was the severe disparity between the penalties for powder cocaine and crack (rock form) cocaine (Burris-Kitchen & Burris, 2011;
Drug Policy Alliance, 2001; Sabet, 2005) and its application to first-time non-violent offenders (Alexander, 2010). Crack cocaine was most prevalent in Black communities. This legislation led to a skyrocket of first-time non-violent drug offenders, predominantly Black men, who served prison sentences ranging from five to fifteen years. Alexander (2010) notes the unprecedented nature in the severity of this legislation noting, “until 1988, one year of imprisonment had been the maximum for possession of any amount of any drug” (p.54). This ‘war on drugs’ became termed a ‘war on Black communities’.

With the impact of this legislation immediately felt in the Black community, the prison population dramatically increased and by the early 1990’s one fourth of the young Black male population was involved with the criminal justice system. Furthermore, Alexander (2010) highlights how under the Clinton administration, ironically referred to in mainstream media as the nation’s ‘first Black president’, the state and federal prison populations increased, larger than “any president in American history” (p.56). Now with systemic structures and policies in place that discriminate based on conviction status in employment, housing, education, and one’s right to vote, largely impacting Black men, Alexander (2010) aptly defines this as ‘the New Jim Crow’.

Mass Imprisonment and the Prison Industrial Complex

With escalating rates of convictions and consequential lengthy prison sentences, came an increase in the prison population. This has directly expedited the need for more prisons. The seemingly dire urgency for prisons to house the increasing inmate population subsequently birthed the Prison Industrial Complex (Smith & Hattery, 2006). The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) represents a complex interrelated network “that extends outward beyond any one…prison…into the larger political economy and loops back to the thousands
of…prisons…that house men…” (Smith & Hattery, 2010, p.388). Smith & Hattery (2010) further postulate that the PIC does not emphasize rehabilitation of prisoners, but rather views the prison population as an exploitable labor force. “Incarceration has become a multi-billion dollar industry…that relies on incarcerating more than 2 million citizens on any given day in the United States” (p.389).

With striking similarity to today’s perception of the formerly incarcerated population, Alexander (2010) recognizes that during the formation years in the nation’s history, African Americans convicted of a crime had no legal rights or recourse and were “sold as forced laborers” and viewed as “slaves of the state” (p.31). This profit driven perspective has not only impacted the individual, but families and communities that have been left impoverished (Smith & Hattery, 2006, 2010; Wildeman & Western, 2010). “Incarceration…elevates the risk of divorce and separation, diminishes the financial resources and well-being of wives and girlfriends left behind, and is linked to increases in children’s aggression, behavioral problems, and social marginalization” (Wildeman & Western, 2010, p.158). In turn, the impact of incarceration is most damaging to African American families. Data estimates that one of every four African American child born in 1990 has a father who has experienced incarceration (Wildeman & Western, 2010).

Another advantage of this mass imprisonment ethos is the booming industry of prison privatization.

“In the United States, prison architects and contractors, corrections personnel, policy makers and academics, and the thousands of corporate vendors who peddle their wares at the annual trade show of the American Correction Association – hawking everything from toothbrushes and socks to barbed-wire fences and shackles…appear to be far removed from the business of punishment and are intimately involved in the expansion of the prison industrial complex,”
Prison privatization has become a very profitable industry. As noted by Alexander (2010), prisons are a money-making entity into which individuals of power, wealth, and resources have made considerable financial investment. “They are deeply interested in expanding the market – increasing the supply of prisoners…who can be held captive for profit” (p.230), further suggesting that changes to certain legislation (e.g. drug policy) would reduce the population in correctional settings, thereby impacting profit viability of the industry.

A private prison incarcerates offenders for profit. Dating back to the 17th century, privatization of prisons was encouraged in the 1960’s. This was a time of social dissatisfaction with the government’s inability to adequately fulfill its correctional responsibilities (Blakely & Bumphus, 2004). This movement was revived in the 1980’s when several counties in Florida entered into contracts with the private sector (Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 2003). For smaller states, private prisons are attractive because of their reported cost effectiveness. Under the Bush administration, the private prison industry grew significantly at both the state and federal levels. Between 1995 and 2000, the number of private facilities increased dramatically growing from 110 to 264 prisons, an increase of over 140%, followed by a 9% increase in federal facilities, and only 3% in state facilities (Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 2003). From a business perspective, the goal of prison corporations is to keep its prison facilities full (Alexander, 2010; Hallet, 2004; Smith & Hattery, 2010).

The premise of critical race theory is that racial privilege and related oppression are firmly rooted in both the history and law of the United States, thus making racism “a normal and ingrained feature of our landscape” (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008, p.626). Looking at the
historical parallelism of post-slavery treatment of Blacks alongside today’s judicial practices magnifies the pervasive nature and perpetuating structures of racism. In essence, the prison industrial complex has become the new plantation, with Black men its exploitable labor force (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2007; Smith & Hattery, 2008).

**Effects of Mass Incarceration**

The experience of incarceration has ramifications not just to the incarcerated individual, but also to his family and the larger community (Smith & Hattery, 2010). The depletion of financial, human, social, and political capital is taking its toll on many communities, particularly urban communities. “When we lock up one-third of all African American men between the ages of 14 and 35 there are devastating losses in human capital” (Smith & Hattery, 2010, p.394). African American males are more likely released into communities that are under-resourced or simply depleted. For those re-entering these communities, many do not have immediate employable or marketable skills aside from those that may have led to their incarceration. Alexander (2010) recognizes the significant disadvantage this population encounters in their efforts to reintegrate and secure employment. “Not only are African Americans far more likely to be labeled criminals, they are also more strongly affected by the stigma of a criminal record. Black men convicted of felonies are the least likely to receive job offers of any demographic group and suburban employers are the most unwilling to hire them” (p.151).

Juxtaposed with the deficiency of human capital is the absence of social capital. Social capital refers to “social networks and the resources that are embedded within these social networks that an individual, group, or community can access” (Smith & Hattery, 2010, p.395). In communities already impacted by unemployment, low wages, crime, inadequate
educational systems, which now have an inflow of individuals being released from a correctional setting, what few resources that may be available will be insufficient. On a whole, formerly incarcerated individuals are a population with very few allies. Additionally, particularly for formerly incarcerated Black men who are newly released and reengaging their families and communities, typically do not bring assets or resources that immediately benefit the community; they often overburden what few resources there are (Wildeman & Western, 2010).

**The Social Exclusion of the Formerly Incarcerated Population**

Being an active and engaged member of one’s community can contribute to an individual’s sense of purpose and connectedness to the larger surrounding environment (Saleebey, 2009). The restriction, even elimination, of one’s voice in matters that may directly impact one’s self and those to whom one is connected, can be very disempowering. Geiger (2006) describes this powerlessness as historically systemic and perpetually marginalizing. In turn, this can erode any sense of investment and commitment to the community. Felony disenfranchisement legislation constricts, even eliminates, the voting rights of individuals with a felony conviction. According to Marc Mauer of the Sentencing Project (2011):

“As of 2010, incarcerated felons in forty-eight states (all but Maine and Vermont) and the District of Columbia are ineligible to vote; in thirty-five of these states, persons on probation and/or parole are also ineligible, and in twelve states even people who have completed their felony sentence may be ineligible to vote and are subject to lifetime disenfranchisement in four of those states. In the four most restrictive states—Iowa, Florida, Kentucky, and Virginia—all persons with a felony conviction permanently lose their voting rights, even if they never spend a day in prison. Racial disparities in the criminal justice system translate into disparities in the disenfranchised population as well. An estimated 38% of the total disfranchised population is
African American...overall, nearly two million African Americans are ineligible to vote”

(p.551-552). In stark contrast, many European countries allow all individuals who are incarcerated to vote, disqualifying very few (Alexander, 2010).

Consider communities that have a large population of formerly incarcerated individuals, notably Black men, as residents. Based on these laws, it is very likely that a significant percentage of these communities cannot vote and therefore have no input, influence, or representation in the political arena or toward social policies relevant to their lives, families, or communities. More recently, Black males, young and old, have been impacted most drastically by crime policies. With the “war on drugs” legislation, most notably the Rockefeller Drug Laws (NYCLU, 2009; Smith & Hattery, 2010) came: longer prison sentences; mandatory minimum sentencing; drug offenses formerly classified as misdemeanors, now re-categorized as felonies; and “three strikes you’re out” sentencing (Smith & Hattery, 2006). Additionally, formation and the application of these policies promoted (un)intended consequences – the racialization of crime and the racial disparity of these laws.

These shifts in crime policy, specifically legislation related to non-violent drug offenses, have been directly correlated with the drastic rise in the U.S. prison population, particularly the imprisonment of African American males (Mauer, 2004). In 2003, an analysis of the country’s drug policy was conducted and disparities were glaring. “I don’t think anyone intended it to be this way, but if you were trying to design a system to incarcerate as many African American...men as possible, I don’t think you could have designed a better system” (Piper, Briggs, Huffan, Lubot-Conk, 2003, p. 18).
Persons with a felony conviction that are trying to re-enter society are negatively impacted in a multiplicity of ways: employment, housing, education, and even voting. Federally funded programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) that provide cash benefits and food stamps; and public housing have instituted bans that limit, even deny, access to these resources (Smith & Hattery, 2010). Accessing federal funds for a college education is now being restricted, specifically to individuals who have a felony drug conviction. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) screens all student applicants for federal and state drug convictions. Applicants are asked if they have a conviction for possessing or selling illegal drugs. Applicants who respond ‘yes’ must then complete a worksheet to determine their eligibility for federal student funds (http://www.ifap.ed.gov/drugworksheets/attachments/StudentAidEligibilityWorksheetEng1314.pdf).

The Criminal Offense Record Information record (CORI), the disclosure of which is often a prerequisite for securing employment in most settings, remains a significant barrier to employment among the formerly incarcerated population, even for those who may have discharged from correctional settings decades ago (Alexander, 2010; ACLU, 1999; Boyd, 2001, National Employment Law Project, 2014). Alexander (2010) notes the lack of discretion given to those convicted of a drug crime who, particularly if the amount is minimal and, although convicted of a felony offense, never spend a day in prison. “There is little hope for escape…barred from public housing by law, discriminated against by private landlords, ineligible for food stamps, forced to ‘check the box’ indicating felony conviction on employment applications…denied licenses for…professions, people whose only crime is
drug addiction or possession of a small amount of drugs for recreational use find themselves locked out of the mainstream society and economy - permanently,” (p.94).

Recidivism And Desistance

Given the backdrop of mass incarceration, the racialization of crime, and exclusion of ex-offenders in the contributory contexts in the larger social environment, it is important to also discuss how the formerly incarcerated population is discussed in the literature and the gap that exists in the current body of literature. Given the criminological context, ex-offenders are primarily examined through two primary behavioral lenses: recidivism and desistance. With particular attention to Black men, this literature is very significant given their disproportionate representation in criminal data. A review of relevant literature and its relation to the purpose of this research study is provided.

Recidivism

The likelihood of an ex-offender violating mandatory community supervision (i.e. probation or parole) or being re-arrested and reconvicted is influenced by an array of psychosocial and environmental factors. “Without education, job skills, and other basic services, offenders are likely to repeat the same steps that brought them to jail [or prison] in the first place” (Pew Center on the States, 2011, p.2). This reality is all too apparent for Black males. In addition to unemployment, low education, and limited community based resources, race continues to be identified as a salient context, with Black men recidivating at rates higher than both their White and Hispanic counterparts (McGovern, Demuth, & Jacoby, 2009).

The National Institute for Justice (NIJ, 2010) defines recidivism as “a person's relapse into criminal behavior, often after receiving sanctions [administered by federal, state, or local
jurisdictions] or undergoing intervention [drug treatment, employment training] for a previous crime” (Recidivism section, para 1). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS, 2012), the federal agency that collects, organizes, and maintains state and federal crime data “recidivism is measured by criminal acts that resulted in the re-arrest, reconviction, or return to prison with or without a new sentence during a three-year period following the prisoner's release” (About this topic section, para 1). For most states, the three-year criterion is most commonly used as the determinant for recidivism (The Sentencing Project, 2010; Pew Center on the States, 2011).

Reisig, Bales, Hay, & Wang (2007) examined the relationship between race, recidivism, and social context, acknowledging the “person-level attributes” (p.409), such as an ex-offender’s criminal history, not completing high school, unstable employment, and limited familial connections. Because African American men reflect higher rates of these experiences, these features alone put this population at risk for recidivating. Notwithstanding, Reisig et al., (2007) underscores an equally significant factor that must also be considered: the social context of the community to which he is being released. Attention to this particular focus, Reisig et al., (2007) states, has not been adequately explored. “To date, only a small number of studies…have examined the role social context plays in recidivism. This is a significant oversight” (Reisig et al., 2007, p.410). The communities to which this population is often released are themselves plagued by poverty, racial inequality, and crime (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005), all of which can foster an atmosphere for re-offending, leading to recidivism (Reisig et al., 2007). This context when combined with the multiple identities these men fulfill – father, brother, provider, protector – must also be
considered. It was a central aim of this study to be cognizant of the interplay of these dynamics and their influence to recidivistic tendencies.

**Desistance**

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in the field of criminology from that of concentration on recidivism to a growing interest to better understand the concept of desistance. The National Institute for Justice (NIJ, 2008) defines desistance as “the process by which a person arrives at a permanent state of non-offending” (Recidivism and desistance, para. 3). The NIJ further notes the relationship between recidivism and desistance; upon release, an (ex) offender will either return to (recidivate) or stay out of (desist) prison (NIJ, 2008). As demonstrated, this definition describes desistance as a discreet, quantitative state. Desistance has become a central focus in the criminological literature (Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Farrington, 2007; Kazemian, 2007; Serin & Lloyd, 2009). What is lacking in this body of empirical research is a descriptive exposition of this concept that also recognizes the experiences and processes an individual goes through that leads to his criminal desistance.

Kazemian (2007) provides a critical appraisal of desistance research and highlights compelling limitations in the analysis of criminal desistance. The most significant challenge facing the study of desistance is the inconsistency of how it is defined, operationalized, and measured. At present, there is no well-defined unanimity of this matter (Kazemian, 2007). This inconsistency is elucidated by Kazemian (2007), who outlines how desistance has been operationalized in 11 studies completed between 1991 and 2003 all employing contrasting definitions. The one constant among these studies was the measurement of desistance as static, “that is ceasing or stopping something” (Bushway et al., 2003, p.130). This data was
captured through official and self-reports of desistance. Divergent markers described as “cutting points……[those] who offend at least once before a specified cutoff but not afterwards” (Bushway et al., 2003, p.130) were used to measure this static approach to desistance. These cut off points varied greatly across the reviewed studies (Kazemian, 2007).

Through further review of relevant literature, prominent contributors to this body of knowledge (Sampson & Laub, 2003; Maruna & Roy, 2007) have recognized that desistance can no longer be defined solely as a discreet concrete variable (state of offending) but needs to further be conceptualized as “a gradual, developmental process” (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001; Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Kazemian, 2007). Desistance as a transitional, rather than sudden, experience highlights equifinality, that there may be diverse paths and processes that lead to the same outcome of an ex-offender no longer offending (Bushway et al., 2003). This perspective has been adopted and subsequently reinforced in the literature (Maruna, 2004; Farrall, 2005; Farrington, 2007). Farrington (2007) surmises “…the frequency of offending at any age depends not only on the strength of the underlying construct but also on environmental factors such as opportunities and on cognitive (decision-making) processes…desistance should be influenced by all of these factors” (p.126). This commentary echoes a point of alliance among the literature critiqued by Kazemian (2007). “What is lacking in desistance literature is not a contrast of desisters versus persisters but rather an understanding of the internal and external factors that promote the desistance process within individuals” (Kazemian, 2007, p.11).

In addition to emphasizing desistance as “dynamic” (Bushway et al., 2001; Bushway et al., 2003), a gradual, developmental process, and to better capture changes that occur in the
dynamics of offending, Kazemian (2007) summarizes three key issues to be considered in the measurement and operationalization of desistance: to emphasize within-individual change because this may be more valuable for guiding intervention initiatives; to invest efforts to better explain the mechanisms (internally and externally) that come into play during phases in which offenders are “in the process of desisting” instead of focusing solely on the point of termination, it is invaluable; and, to integrate “criminal career parameters…frequency, seriousness…” as there could be some benefit to including this information (Kazemian, 2007, p.19).

For the purpose of this study, desistance was operationalized taking Kazemian’s (2007) recommendations into consideration. In this study, desistance was defined as being out of prison for five or more years, after having receiving a certificate of release from prison, parole, or probation. Given that three years is the most common marker for non-recidivism, the two additional years allow for an extended time period to evaluate the experience of change among participants while in the process of desisting.

The contrast between quantitative and qualitative methodologies in desistance studies is often characterized by how desistance is being operationalized (Carlsson, 2012). Studies that measure desistance as a discreet state of offending to non-offending have not captured the full scope of the subjective processes an individual may experience in his process of change (Bushway, et al., 2001; Bushway, et al., 2003 as cited in Carlsson, 2012). This has been observed in studies applying life course theory as the theoretical framework. Life course theory is a dominant paradigm in the examination of desistance from crime. Life course theory posits that there is a correlation between turning points in a person’s life that promotes age-graded shifts in one’s criminal behavior (Carlsson, 2012). Seminal works by
Sampson & Laub (Sampson & Laub, 1992; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 2003), which examine desistance and the life course, are frequently referenced in the literature.

Currently, there is little qualitative data available on the experience of desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men. An exploratory study conducted by Hughes (1998) focused on desistance from destructive criminal behaviors by a group of 20 young, urban men from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The focus of this qualitative study was to understand what makes young men forgo crime. Applying life course as the conceptual model, data collected through individual interviews noted four significant factors that influenced trajectories for change in their behaviors: (1) respect and wanting to change for children; (2) fear of physical harm or incarceration; (3) contemplation time; and (4) support and modeling. Limitations of this study are that its findings cannot be generalized due to its small sample size and its reliance on self-reported histories. In summary, findings from this study highlighted qualities of survival, strength, and perseverance and emphasized the need for research to further explore for factors that lead to positive change (Hughes, 1998).

Teti, Martin, Ranade, Massie, Malebranche, Tschann, & Bowleg (2011) explored resiliency among 30 low-income urban Black men. One third (n=10) of this study’s sample had histories of incarceration. This qualitative study conducted semi-structured interviews asking five specific questions about their experiences as a Black man. Participants highlighted several socio-structural challenges: racial micro-aggressions; incarceration; unemployment; and the stress of the streets (Teti, et al., 2011). Despite these challenges, characteristics of resilience emerged in the following forms: perseverance, commitment to learning and growing from hardship; reflecting and refocusing to address difficulties;
creating a supportive environment; and religion and/or spirituality. A limitation of this study was how resilience was operationalized, acknowledging the lack of consensus in the resilience literature about how to define this term (Teti, et al., 2011). Also, given the sampling methodology, findings are not generalizable. Participants were largely low-income, unemployed, and lived in an urban community. Lastly, because this study was exploratory, the interview guide did not include specific questions about resilience. In summary, future implications suggest continued qualitative and exploratory research. The purpose should be to provide a deeper understanding of the complex nature of Black men and the socio-structural issues they face daily, in addition to including how, where, whom and from what they develop their resilience (Teti et al., 2011).

As is evidenced by the studies cited, additional research exploring the concept of desistance among Black men is needed. Research must be multifaceted: recognizing the complex nature of the formerly incarcerated Black male identity; the daily realities this population must contend with; the efforts taken by this group to stay out of prison; and validation of formerly incarcerated Black men’s persistence in the context of their social environments and lived experiences. Such exploration is needed to contribute further depth and perspective of understanding about this population. Given the focus of this study, it is contributory to the limited body of literature currently available about this population. Although findings are not generalizable, it does provide essential and invaluable life stories, and as stressed by Delgado & Stefancic (2007), underscoring the importance of hearing the voices and experiences of this marginalized, under-included, population.

There is also a body of literature that explores the experience of self-change among formerly incarcerated individuals. Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon (2008) conducted a
phenomenological study including interviews with five male ex-offenders from the United Kingdom (UK). All grew up in the inner city and had desisted from crime for at least two years at the time of the interview. One of the salient points in the findings was that of “conflicting selves…the status ex-offender poses a dilemma for the self, as it has negative implications for the self, yet it is also important for maintaining a positive sense of self and pro-social behavior” (Aresti et al., 2010, p.186). The researchers note that despite efforts by the participants to express and maintain a positive sense of self, they struggled with internalized stigma around the label of ‘ex-offender’. In addition to the many derogatory labels and identities attributed to Black males, real or assumed in the larger social construct, this is one that seems ever-present. Identification of internal and external factors that promote desistance was a primary goal of this research. An anticipated benefit of this study was also to offer and affirm an alternative, positive discourse about formerly incarcerated Black men, both for society’s benefit, but more importantly for this population.

**International Perspective of Desistance**

In the review of the desistance literature, it has been observed that there is a distinct international presence. This observation of international efforts to promote non-recidivism through the examination of desistance seems noteworthy given that the U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world (Hartney, 2006). Current literature (Barnao, Robertson, & Ward, 2010), although not focused on African Americans, highlights intervention models and practices that promote non-recidivism, ideally leading to desistance, among their offender population. Approaches that emphasize potential and possibility among this group have been recognized as vital in promoting non-recidivism towards desistance. The Pew Center on the States (2011) highlights, as a strategy for success, the need for research that amplifies
benefits and not only disadvantages. “[J]ust like everyone else, [offenders] respond better to the prospect of rewards than to the fear of punishment” (Pew Center on the States, 2011, p.31).

**Conceptual Framework**

This study is situated within risk and resiliency theory, and the principles of the strengths perspective (Greene, 2007; Saleebey, 2009). These perspectives informed the conceptual framework of this research. This conceptual framework provides the context for understanding how for some formerly incarcerated Black men, despite their marginalized status in society, disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system, and the complex, interconnected identities of being Black, male, and an ex-offender, they are able to not recidivate and be successful in staying out of prison.

Given the intertwined, multifaceted realities of this population’s daily lived experiences, the theoretical lenses of critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality were also integrated. These paradigms, both rooted in black feminist theory, provided an important multidimensional lens through which to understand and explore the ubiquitous dynamics of both systemic oppression and racism, while also magnifying the interpersonal and structural discrimination that this population encounters and must manage with on a daily basis, while also remaining out of prison.

**Critical Race Theory**

As a backdrop to understanding and exploring the full scope of the lived experiences of desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men, it was essential to contextualize this research to the socio-structural disadvantages, specifically the legal system, with which they must contend. Critical race theory (CRT) provides an important context through which to
acknowledge institutional structures, particularly judicial policies, this population encounters in their efforts to remain out of prison. This theory’s ultimate goal is to examine, deconstruct, and alter the power relationships that have established and reified, and continually do so, marginalized racial groups (Freeman, 2011).

**Key Themes of Critical Race Theory**

**Racism as ordinary.** Delgado and Stefancic (2007) state one tenet that resonates consistently among critical race scholars is “that racism is ordinary, not exceptional, the usual way that society does business” (p.136). Freeman (2011) builds on this statement, noting that racism is firmly entrenched within the structures and organization of American culture. “The invisibility…colorblindness…of this structural racism makes it difficult to unpack, and it therefore allows continuing racial privilege despite the banning of the most visible signs of racial discrimination” (p.184).

Delgado & Stefancic (2007) deepen their discussion of critical race theory by providing the criminal justice lens in relation to this theme, stating “…the way we [the criminal justice system] have defined certain behavior as threatening and have made certain acts criminal or noncriminal convinces most of us [American society] that Blacks…are, on average, more dangerous than whites” (p.140). This statement is evidenced by the disproportionate incarceration of Black men.

**Material determinism.** This theme speaks to the idea that race and racism fulfill essential psychological and material interests in American society (Freeman, 2011). Essentially, those who benefit from racial and socioeconomic disadvantage have little desire to want to do away with it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). For example, privatization of prisons has become a very profitable industry; why would those reaping the financial rewards
want to change it? There is no clear incentive to provoke the desire to change this profit making entity. For change to occur, even be considered, benefits to the majority must be obvious (Freeman, 2011).

Through the criminal justice lens, Delgado & Stefancic (2007) speak to the war on drugs and essentially how “economically senseless” (p.140) the approach to the problem of drug related crimes has been. The authors raise provocative, yet pertinent, questions:

“What could underlie this attitude? Does morality-based legislation strengthen White solidarity, helping draw the lines between us and them – the saved and the unsaved? Do the enormous profits in the privatized prison-building industry provide a partial reason? Do felony conviction and disenfranchisement benefit the Republic Party by taking Black voters off the rolls? Does Black imprisonment allow for manipulation of the labor pool so that when the job market is weak and Whites fear competition, they can reduce some of it?” (p.141).

Instituting harsh sentencing practices instead of cost-effective rehabilitation seems to be to the benefit of those in power.

**Social construction of race.** Critical race theory affirms that race is a social construction and does not have a biological or genetic origin. Recognizing that people do share common physical traits, races relate to no simple biological or genetic reality. They are classifications that society invents for certain purposes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007; Freeman, 2011). Delgado & Stefancic (2007) expand on this acknowledging “intersectionality and antiessentialism…that no person has a single, easily stated unitary identity. Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities…” (p.137-8). This resoundingly characterizes the daily reality of the formerly incarcerated Black male desisting from crime. Delgado & Stefancic (2007) speak to how society has constructed and stereotyped the image of the “typical Black offender…and treating them differently in the
way [for instance] defense attorneys interact with – or “construct” – them as client” (p.141) and will plea-bargain their case.

**Storytelling and counter-storytelling.** This concept within critical race theory contends that voice of marginalized groups, people of color, are “unique and must be heard in order to understand how structures of power actually work. Marginalized voices are sometimes more effective in comprehending both the intended and unintended consequences of laws or actions by public bureaucracies” (Freeman, 2011, p.185). This theme is considered as most critical by Delgado & Stefancic (2007). The authors reference a book, *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007) that chronicles the experiences of Black women prisoners. “These stories need telling, and not just in an op-ed column or two” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007, p.142). These stories, if not told, would remain invisible and irrelevant to the society. This, in turn, perpetuates the marginalization of formerly incarcerated Black men.

**Critique of critical race theory.** Given its commitment to disrupt a very pervasive construct well threaded throughout today’s society, CRT has encountered resistance. One prominent focus of criticism has been on the ‘voice’, storytelling theme, of scholars and “the critique of merit, truth, and objectivity…” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.99). The issue of challenge is the notion that “minority scholars enjoyed a certain expertise…about racial issues…question[ing] whether minority scholars have any particular claim to expertise simply by virtue of who they are” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp.99-100). Critics argue that whites may also be equally committed and invested in race and civil rights and have much to contribute that is also valid.
Further critiques caution CRT scholars against “radical multiculturalism…hiding behind personal accounts and narratives to advance their points of view” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp.101-102) and invalidating traditional efforts of scholarship. This appraisal is expanded by the additional criticism that storytelling suppresses dialogue and debate. “The voice of color…seems to imply that critical race theorists have a deeper understanding of certain issues than their white counterparts” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.103). Although acknowledging of white scholars who write on this focus, critical race theorists believe that such issues are oftentimes better spoken to and about by people of color. This idea was still met with disagreement, with critics noting “…in some situations race can serve as a ‘useful proxy for a whole collection of experiences, aspirations and sensitivities’…[but] the best test of a proposition’s validity…is not the race of the author but the logical and factual cogency of the text” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp.103-104).

In addition to these external criticisms, scholars within this field also engage in self-criticism recognizing that “theory and practice need to work together” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p.105), evaluating its contextual efficacy and applicability.

**Intersectionality**

Critical race theory has provided an introduction to the cogency of intersectionality within the context of this qualitative research. Despite the complexities of their daily lives, there are those formerly incarcerated Black men who do not return to prison. This population has identified ways in which to circumvent structural disadvantages and desist from crime. Awareness to the multiple identities of formerly incarcerated Black men, their lived experiences and how they intersect with social realities, is essential to acknowledge.
As a theory, intersectionality postulates that “an understanding of a person’s social location, that is, his…place in society that is formed by the intersection of social constructions that mark privilege and oppression, is essential to capturing the complexity of that person’s experiences, including his…actions, choices, and outcomes” (Murphy et al., 2009, p.7). This perspective also reduces the risk of nuances “in experiences being discounted” and avoiding the practice of “homogenizing” (p.8), diminishing by generalization, the experiences of others. Intersectionality gives primacy to the interaction between key areas of oppression: race, class, and gender, which is defined as structural intersectionality, while still acknowledging other locations where systems of power converge (Murphy et al., 2009).

**Concepts of Intersectionality**

**Social inequality.** Social inequality acknowledges the unequal access to resources, services, and positions in society. Historically, social inequality focused more on social class and disregarded race as an important aspect to consider (Murphy et al., 2009). Within this study, it was important to be aware of this concept through the lens of race, gender, and class.

**Over- and under-inclusion.** This concept speaks to how some groups remain insufficiently researched in scholarly literature. Homogenization promotes an invisibility of a particular group (Murphy et al., 2009), in this case, formerly incarcerated Black men. Their representation in current literature is distorted and imbalanced, with primary focus on occurrences of failure (i.e. recidivism) and limited information available that emphasizes success and achievement (i.e. desistance and resilience).

**Marginalization and social location.** Murphy et al., (2009) describes marginalization as the delicate interplay between race and gender, and one’s place in society,
and how it is influenced by these social constructs. This relationship has typically been illustrated through the social and economic inequalities experienced by women of color. For formerly incarcerated Black men, their daily realities may include encounters with these inequalities through the inability to access affordable housing, education, employment, and restrictions to political engagement (e.g. felony disenfranchisement laws).

**Matrix of domination.** This view affirms that even though race, class, and gender may be used as descriptive demographic variables, it is a distinct reality that they are also “continuously changing social relations of inequality and systems of oppression larger than individual demographics or identities” (Murphy et al., 2009, p.13). These contexts must be analyzed from the larger systemic, privileged perspective, and not from that of the individual. As referenced by Murphy et al., (2009) “analyzing race, class, and gender must be about the hierarchies and systems of domination that permeate society” (Andersen, 2005, p.446).

**Critique of intersectionality.** Although seemingly new to social work literature, Murphy et al., (2009) document the history of this perspective, dating back to the 1800’s to present day. In recent years, the concept of intersectionality has contributed greatly to better understanding of the intertwined nature of complex social identities and dynamics of oppression, power, and privilege. Recognizing the great benefits and contributions specifically to social work education, it is felt that intersectionality is “underutilized and marginalized” in disciplines outside the scope of women’s studies (Murphy et al., 2009, p.25). The authors’ further caution that although connections among and across identities are obvious, it must be recognized that these identities all also operate as systems of oppression or power relations. “[R]esearchers [are] not to treat them as equivalent to each other because
they differ with regard to how they are socially produced and maintained” (Murphy et al., 2009, p.25).

**Micro-aggressions: An Omnipresent Social Context**

In addition to systems of oppression, this conceptual framework includes a lens through which to understand the interpersonal experiences of oppression formerly incarcerated Black men face. A pervasive, yet subtle, undercurrent attuned to in this study was that of micro-aggressions this population encounters on a daily basis due to race, gender, and forensic status. Micro-aggressions are defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, 2010, p.5). Within the context of this study, attention to racial micro-aggressions, “any attitude, institutional structure, or social policy that subordinates persons or groups because of their color” (Sue, 2010, p.7) were highlighted and subsequently emerged as relevant in study findings.

In its formal application, gender micro-aggressions refer to “blatant, unfair, and unequal treatment toward women [which] can be manifested in sexual harassment, physical abuse, discriminatory hiring practices, or in women being subjected to a hostile, predominantly male work environment” (Sue, 2010, p.11). Within the context of this qualitative study, micro-aggressions were defined by interactions experienced as discriminatory by the study participants because they are Black, male, and have a history of incarceration. For example, literature has shown that white men with a felony are more likely to be offered employment than a Black man without a felony record (Smith & Hattery, 2010). Unemployment is a well-documented contributing risk factor of recidivism. Criminal
Offenders Records Inquiry (CORI) has become a standardized instrument used in the pre-screening criterion of employment applications. Regardless of whether or not one’s criminal record has bearing on the employment criteria required (i.e. entry level, low skill labor positions) CORIs are used as a reason to deny employment to ex-offenders despite an applicant’s qualifications.

**The Theoretical Framework of Risk and Resilience**

Greene, Galambos, & Lee (2003) call attention to the parallel between social work and the risk and resilience approach, “the study of what circumstances contribute to successful consequences in the face of adversity...[what people] often possess...to overcome pain and to transform themselves” (p.76), given the profession’s commitment to serving vulnerable and disempowered populations. It is equally important to recognize strengths while also acknowledging risk and difficulties. The complementary connection between the profession of social work and the application of a risk and resilience framework is termed by Greene (2007) as an integrative approach, combining concepts that are incorporated in the profession’s knowledge base of professional practice (e.g. purpose, values, ethics) and the ideas for understanding social problems and how to think about addressing them. Greene (2007) highlights “to have a better understanding of social problems and to design effective interventions, social workers need to assess both risk and resilience factors” (p.14).

**Risk and Protective Factors**

Risk and resilience is a theoretical framework that underscores a person’s ability to overcome, triumph, and succeed despite hardships. Risk refers to the probability that a person who has experienced a dire life situation is likely to encounter future challenges. Risk
factors can be both internal and external, and contribute to a person’s coping abilities (Greene, 2007).

Protective factors, which can also be internal and external, mitigate the influence of risks and increase the likeliness of success. This, in turn, facilitates resilience. Greene (2007) provides an overview of how resilience has been defined in the literature,

“the first is recovering from trauma following adverse events…the second is overcoming the odds or negotiating life transitions with competence…the third…is overcoming life stress, or successfully handling events that are perceived as harmful. In short, resilience [emphasis included] refers to people’s internalized capacities and the associated behaviors that enable them to maintain a sense of integration in the face of adversities” (p.45).

Upon release from prison, there are many obstacles an ex-offender is likely to encounter. Despite these challenges, for some ex-offenders, they are able to overcome and not return to a correctional setting.

The study of resilience has elicited a shift from a traditional problem-saturated theoretical lens to one emphasizing nurturance and strengths (Richardson, 2002). “Resiliency and resilience have emerged as intriguing areas of inquiry that explores personal and interpersonal gifts and strengths that can be accessed to grow through adversity” (Richardson, 2002, p.307). Resilience is distinct in two specific ways: (a) it is informed by various methods and evidence from the various professional disciplines; and (b) it understands and highlights processes that ultimately promote well-being among those at risk (Luthar & Brown, 2007).

Inquiries about resiliency did not begin with traditional academic tenets, but rather through studying the phenomena of those living in high-risk situations and the subsequent identification of characteristics from those surviving the experiences (Richardson, 2002).
Richardson (2002) discusses relevant claims of resilience and resiliency theory. Having non-traditional origins in phenomenological inquiry, resilience has been organized in three waves: first wave, resilient qualities; second wave, the process of resiliency; and a third wave, innate resilience (Richardson, 2002).

**First wave: resilient qualities.** This first wave of resilience inquiry signaled the shift from focus on risk factors and the relating problems to identification of an individual’s strengths (Richardson, 2002). Supported by the seminal works of Werner (1982, as cited in Richardson, 2002), this wave included an individual’s descriptions of the phenomena of resilience, which included “qualities, assets, or protective factors that help people grow through adversity [such as] happiness…subjective well-being…optimism…faith…self-determination…wisdom…creativity” (Richardson, 2002, pp.308-10). This first wave was instrumental to identifying resilient qualities. It also incited the need to better understand the “how” of resilience, that is, “how people actually improve…acquire resilient qualities” (Richardson, 2002, p.310).

**Second wave: process of resiliency.** Richardson (2002) notes a key aspect of the resilience process is “biopsychospiritual homeostasis…a point in time when one has adapted physically, mentally, and spiritually to a set of circumstances whether good or bad” (p.311). This state of equilibrium is regularly impacted by both internal and external dynamics, “disruptions…life prompts, stressors, adversity, opportunities” (Richardson, 2002, p.311) provoking within the individual a change in one’s perspective, be it positive or negative. These disruptions lead to one of two experiences: resilient or dysfunction reintegration.

“Resilient reintegration is to experience some insight or growth through disruptions. The process is an introspective experience in identifying, accessing, and nurturing resilient qualities. The essence of reintegration back to homeostasis is to heal and ‘just get past’ a disruption. Dysfunctional
reintegration occurs when people resort to substances, destructive behaviors, or other means to deal with the life prompts. Most people who reintegrate dysfunctionally have blind spots in their introspective skills…”

(Richardson, 2002, p.312). An individual’s ability to move forward is demonstrative of repeated resilient reintegration; whereby stagnation characterizes “getting past experiences” rather than growing through them (Richardson, 2002).

**Third wave: innate resilience.** Resilience can be succinctly defined as an internal force that motivates an individual to seek self-actualization, wisdom, and harmony with a spiritual source of power (Richardson, 2002). Richardson (2002) notes the quest for answers to “what and where is the energy source or motivation to reintegrate resiliently?” (p.313) prompted this third wave of resiliency inquiry. Reflectively, this third wave is recognized as the oldest wave, given the consistency of its origin and supporting description across the many disciplines of the motivating force leading to self-actualization. This description embodies two primary claims: the source comes from one’s ecosystem and; resilience is a capacity in every person’s soul or psyche (Richardson, 2002).

**Critique of the study of risk and resilience.** A consistent critique in the resilience literature solely lies with how this concept is defined across studies. Luthar & Brown (2007) highlight two central areas for concentration in risk and resilience research in order to either validate or refute findings. First, relationships are at the foundation of resilience. Relationships that are abusive, riddled with bitterness and malice, or provoke insecurity threaten resilience. In contrast those that stimulate security, reinforce strengths, and extend support and love, promote resilience. Second, the major precursors or predictors of resilience are primarily similar rather than distinct when resilience is defined as “(a) sustained positive adjustment following traumas and (b) recovery displayed after initial maladjustment.
following negative life events” (Luthar & Brown, 2007, p.948). These descriptive characteristics are applied in the construction of the interview protocol used in this research. The questions developed also take into consideration the developmental process of resilience over the years, asking questions that are reflective of the waves of inquiry in resilience theory.

Luthar & Brown (2007) also stress the importance of using various methods from other social science disciplines in ongoing resilience research. “Ethnographic, qualitative studies can be invaluable in guiding our hypothesis: testing of salient protective and vulnerability processes in different subcultural contexts” (Luthar & Brown, 2007, p.948). The authors assert the importance for researchers in this area of interest who are committed to maximizing the well-being of those facing adversities, in this case ex-offenders who encounter rejection and oppression along their journey of desisting from crime, to contribute to this knowledge base in order to inform intervention and policy. Quoting Petersen (2006, as referenced in Luthar & Brown, 2007), “seize every opportunity to educate. Let other colleagues and the broader public know what it is we do, how we do it, and why it is important…if we do not advocate our work, who will?” (p.948). One purpose of this study was to respond to this transparent call.

**Principles of the Strengths Perspective**

Principles of the strengths perspective seem inherently concomitant with risk and resiliency theory. Several aspects of this perspective are harmonious with resilience: empowerment; membership; synergy; and affirmation (Greene, 2007). Saleebey (2009) notes two major philosophical principles of this perspective: a) liberation and empowerment; and b) alienation and oppression.
Liberation and empowerment: heroism and hope. This philosophical tenet is embedded in the idea of potential: “the opportunities for choice, commitment, and action whether pursued in relative tranquility or in grievous circumstance” (Saleebey, 2009, p.7). This liberation, freedom, as described by Saleebey (2009), is characteristic of resilience; “somewhere within...lies the longing for the heroic: to transcend circumstances, to develop one’s own powers, to face adversity down, to stand up and be counted. Liberation unleashes human energy and spirit…new ways of being and doing” (Saleebey, 2009, p.7).

Alienation and oppression: anxiety and evil. This principle acknowledges the reality of the world in which we exist – “bigotry, hatred, war, slaughter, repression…vicious acts of cruelty…intolerance” (Saleebey, 2009, p.8). The anxiety and fear triggered by these experiences may provoke a person’s need to problem solve on their own, not always in a manner that is productive, leading to “vulnerability and eventual demise” (p.8). Despite this reality, there is still the ability to rise above and do, be different. “We can never dismiss the possibility of redemption, resurrection, and regeneration” (Saleebey, 2009, p.8). In summary, Saleebey (2009) illuminates the essence of the strengths perspective in its core values: plasticity, empowerment, membership, resilience, healing and wholeness, dialogue and collaboration, and suspension of disbelief.

Critique of the strengths perspective. The strengths perspective is not without its critics. Saleebey (2009) acknowledges that even among its ardent practitioners, there are concerns worth noting. One relevant point of critique is the idea that this perspective is “positive thinking in another guise” (Saleebey, 2009, p.285). Acknowledging the contributions of motivational speakers offering up idealistic solutions to problems, Saleebey (2009) makes the distinction from this self-help approach to recognizing the training of a
professional social worker and the expertise in the work done with client systems. “It is hard
work of helping clients and communities build something of lasting value from the social
wealth and human capital within and around them” (p.285). The social work practitioner
must intentionally distinguish herself as a trained and qualified professional, aware of the
various resources that may support principles of strengths, yet requires attentiveness to
“collaborative, appreciative client relationships…the basis for effective, principled work with
clients” (Saleebey, 2009, p.285).

Contributions to Criminology Literature

Resilience theory and the strengths perspective are very complementary to an
emerging concept in criminology literature, positive criminology, a “broad perspective
encompassing diverse models and theories…which focuses on the positive characteristics,
processes, and influences in an individual’s life…,” (Ronel & Elisha, 2011, p.306). The
dominant foci of traditional frameworks within criminology concentrate heavily on static
quantitative measures - indicators, predictors, and factors that suggest the likelihood of a
person’s involvement with crime. Emphasis is directed to deficits and lack of achievement,
with minimal reference to resilience and success. “Criminology has concentrated on
understanding the processes that lead individuals, groups, and societies to deviance and crime
but less on understanding the independent factors that keep them away from crime.
Furthermore, although criminological theories based on a positive perspective exist, Ronel &
Elisha (2011) note, “they receive relatively little attention in the mainstream discourse of
criminology, which places disproportionate emphasis on dealing with negative aspects, as
well as cases of ‘failure’” (p.306).
In contrast, positive criminology amplifies successful interventions with the forensic population and emphasizes these components in an effort to de-stigmatize those with a criminal past and recognize their role, presence, and contributions in the larger society (Ronel & Elisha, 2011). This perspective also strongly correlated with aspects of resilience theory and intersectionality. “The resilience approach refers to processes and patterns of positive adjustment and prevention of lapsing into…deviance, or crime against the background of known risk factors…as well as significant personal, family, social, and other protective factors…emphasiz[ing] the existence of individual protective factors alongside risk factors,” (Ronel & Elisha, 2011, p.307).

Noting features that resonate with the strengths perspective and intersectionality, Ronel & Elisha (2011) highlight “acceptance relationship [emphasis included]…[the] continuous relationship between individuals with ‘deviant’ traits and ‘ordinary’ individuals that are characterized by affection and lack of stigmatization of the traits of the deviant person,” (p.311). Instead of focusing on structural and systemic disadvantages that “create deviance by labeling people who are deviant and excluding them from the general community…there should be intentional efforts to include deviant individuals in the general society rather than exclusion” (p.311). The authors further recommend the use of affirmative approaches that should “contain elements of mutual acceptance…forgiveness, altruism, gratefulness, and appreciation instead of accusation, shaming, rejection, exclusion, and ostracism…to promote the process of rehabilitation of individuals…who want to change and reintegrate into the community,” (Ronel & Elisha, 2011, p.311). Recognizing the complex nature of the formerly incarcerated population’s complex social identities and the many inequalities this group copes with, this
suggestion by Ronel & Elisha (2011) is supportive of recommendations by Murphy et al.,
(2009) to expand the applicability of intersectionality across a broad range of professional
disciplines and expertise.

Through this research, these aggregated theoretical lenses collectively reinforced
resilient characteristics that facilitated desistance among this population.

Literature has also recognized the need for research that identifies resilience and
represents strengths and success specifically among African American men. Teti et al.,
(2011) note this gap in the resilience literature stressing the urgency to better understand
resilience among African Americans. “Such research is necessary to develop a culturally
congruent and empirically sound model of risk and resilience that acknowledges the
structural and pervasive…nature of African Americans’ stressors and incorporates protective
factors specific to African American life and culture” (Teti et al., 2011, p.525). Additionally,
the authors pinpoint the limited availability of resilience content in the literature that is
specific to adults, more definitively Black men, stating “…the extensive nature of Black
men’s sociostructural challenges and the gaps in research to identify their strengths…” (Teti
et al., 2011, p.525).

Jones, Hopson, & Gomes (2012) provide added emphasis to the critical importance of
acknowledging resilient characteristics through an Africentric perspective. This perspective
empowers the individual to approach feelings, knowledge, and actions that are reflective of
diverse lived experiences and recognizes the interconnected nature between race and class.
Jones et al., (2012) comment that a cohesive community context, one that maintains
traditional African American values, is also able to mobilize limited resources while
simultaneously protecting one’s self-worth against a constant array of social and economic assaults, thereby promoting resilience.
Chapter III

Methods
Study Design

This study sought to answer the research question: How do formerly incarcerated Black men understand their desistance from crime? As clearly evidenced by the current body of literature, exploring desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men seemed most fitting through the lens of a qualitative phenomenological research design. In conjunction with the conceptual framework, this research design well supported the call to elevate the voice of a marginalized population, formerly incarcerated Black men.

Employing a phenomenological research design, this study emphasized a procedure that “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Cresswell, 2007, p.57). This qualitative design supports the theoretical framework of resilience in that explorations about resiliency began by examining the phenomena of those experiencing high-risk circumstances and the subsequent identification of characteristics from those who have endured these experiences (Richardson, 2002). Together with this framework, the strengths perspective, contextualized also by critical race theory and intersectionality, are all complementary to phenomenological research. To reiterate, resilience theory magnifies a person’s intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities to be successful, despite difficult, even traumatic, life experiences (Greene, 2007). Juxtaposed to resilience, the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2009) exudes the idea of possibility and potential. Coalescing, these frameworks promote empowerment, collaboration, and affirmation (Greene, 2007). Critical race theory and intersectionality, theoretical paradigms that provide a multidimensional lens through which to explore and begin to understand the lives experiences of formerly incarcerated Black men, were critical to the review and
discussion of study findings. Phenomenological research contributed most relevantly to this goal.

The primary purpose of phenomenology is to highlight the “…universal essence…a grasp of the very nature of the thing” (Cresswell, 2007, p.58) as experienced by a group, rather than the individual experience. A phenomenon is defined as “an “object” of human experience” (Cresswell, 2007, p.58), with the concentrated emphasis of collecting information from a group of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon; and, constructing a succinct description of the experience based on the experiences of the participants (Cresswell, 2007). As Cresswell (2007) further notes, referencing Moustakas, the description that is provided intentionally should underscore the “what” and “how” (p.58) of the participants’ lived experiences of the phenomenon.

In considering the use of a phenomenological design for research, there are two approaches to consider: hermeneutical phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology (Cresswell, 2007). Hermeneutical phenomenology concentrates on the “interpretation of the texts of the lived experiences” (p.59). Transcendental phenomenology, also referred to as psychological phenomenology, focuses more on the “epoche” concept (also defined as bracketing), whereby the researcher sets aside, “suspends”, her own experiences, as much as is possible, in order to be able to take a fresh point of view toward the phenomenon under examination, and remains “transcendental…everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Cresswell, 2007, p.60).

This study primarily utilized procedures supporting a transcendental phenomenological approach. This process included: identifying the phenomenon, in this case, criminal desistance; bracketing out, that is partly setting aside, the researcher’s
experiences; and lastly, gathering data from several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007). The researcher then studied the information collected, reduced the data to statements, comments, and quotes considered significant, and combined these statements into themes. A *textural description*, which describes what the participants experienced; and a *structural description*, which describes how they experienced the phenomenon in terms of conditions, situations, or contexts as a way to convey the overall spirit of the lived experience of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007), is provided in the findings and discussions chapter.

**Data Collection**

**Recruitment of Agency Settings**

The data collection process began by identifying settings where access to this population would be most feasible and available. The communities that consist of Suffolk County in Boston, Massachusetts and all its neighborhoods: Chelsea, Revere, and Winthrop, were identified as primary research settings from which to recruit study participants. Suffolk County was selected because it has the largest population of Blacks (21.6%), most of whom predominantly reside in three neighborhoods: Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan. Statewide, the overall population of Blacks is 6.1%. Additionally, data compiled by the Massachusetts Department of Correction (Mass DOC 2009, 2010, 2011) shows that over 60% of all inmate releases, each year, are to communities in Suffolk County.

Outreach was done to several non-profit human service agencies all located within Suffolk County: SPAN, Inc., StreetSafe Boston, and Boston Worker’s Alliance. These agencies were identified as essential to the process of recruiting study participants as they provide a wide array of support services (e.g. education, employment resources, and
advocacy) specifically to the formerly incarcerated population. Before any recruitment began, the researcher identified the key contact person at each agency. Contact was initiated to the gatekeepers (e.g. executive director, program director) of each agency listed above via telephone, email, and/or in person (Cresswell, 2007). For those agency contacts who did respond to the initial inquiry, the information sheet (Appendix A) was shared with the person. Authorization to talk with staff that directly interacts with this population was also requested.

Once this access was granted, the researcher was then able to share the information sheet and study recruitment flyer (Appendix B) with agency staff. Staff was asked to distribute the study flyers among the consumers and alums of their services. It was clearly emphasized to the gatekeepers and agency staff that participation was voluntary and when speaking with potential participants, to avoid any dialogue or language that could be perceived as coercive. They were also directed to inform interested persons of the following statements: “if you choose to participate in this study, please do not tell me” and “non-participation will have no impact on services that you receive.”

In addition to this outreach to formal support systems, leadership at informal community resources, primarily religious organizations (e.g. churches, mosque), were also contacted. Leaders at these locations were contacted using the same processes through which formal systems were engaged. Formal and informal networks did not receive any form of compensation for their assistance.

Representatives from formal agencies and informal community resources contacted the researcher and expressed strong interest in sharing information about the study. For those who contacted the researcher, there was a willingness to share the study information sheet
with their staff and population served, as well as the study flyer (Appendix B). At the end of the recruitment process, it became evident to the researcher that snowball sampling emerged as the primary strategy, as more than half of study participants learned about this research from a fellow contributor.

**Sampling Strategy**

This principal investigator utilized a sampling strategy that incorporated both criterion and snowball sampling strategies. A philosophical tenet of phenomenological research is about the group’s experience of the specified phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007). Criterion sampling for potential participants was employed. This sampling strategy ensured gathering information about the experience of criminal desistance from those who have experienced it.

Recognizing that sampling strategy can evolve and the researcher needed to remain flexible, this researcher also planned for opportunistic, or snowball, sampling (Cresswell, 2007), that is having the flexibility to take advantage of new leads and unanticipated opportunities to access and recruit participants for this study. Snowball sampling assumes “people who know people…are information rich” (Cresswell, 2007, p.127). Essentially, ex-offenders know other ex-offenders. In general, ex-offenders know: where formerly incarcerated persons are; can identify with what their experiences of incarceration and release have been; and what this population has likely been doing since leaving prison. Formerly incarcerated Black men were viewed as the experts on how to connect with this population.

This strategy proved most advantageous to the participant recruitment process. Of the eleven study participants, seven reported learning about the study from a previous participant. Four of the participants reported they learned about the research from the study flyer. It was at the
discretion of the interested person to initiate contact with the researcher. The researcher did not blindly solicit random individuals for participation.

To be considered for participation in this study, each participant met the following criteria:

- identified as a Black male;
- at least 25 years old;
- had at least one felony conviction;
- was not on probation or parole;
- had no open, unresolved charges; and
- at least five years ago was discharged from a correctional facility (county, state, or federal) with no subsequent reconvictions or return to prison.

The term of five years or more was influenced by current Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) policy. Expiration of sentence, or release to street, refers to an inmate who is released after having fulfilled the requirements of his sentence, including mandatory community supervision (i.e. parole), released with no continued sentence obligations, and given a certificate of release/discharge (Massachusetts Department of Correction, 2012). Given that non-recidivism is typically measured by an individual not returning to a correctional setting at least three years after release (The Sentencing Project, 2010; Pew Center on the States, 2011), this researcher chose to extend this benchmark to five or more years to support the concepts of resilience and desistance.

The researcher was accessible via a designated confidential telephone number provided by Simmons College. Callers were only able to leave a message. The researcher was the only person to have access to this phone number and voice mailbox to retrieve any voice messages. Following retrieval of contact information from interested participants, the researcher returned calls and completed the pre-screen checklist (Appendix C) to confirm
whether or not an interested person met the criteria outlined for participation in this research study. The researcher received a total of sixteen (16) inquiries for participation.

Following completion of the pre-screen checklist with each inquiry, three (3) individuals were prohibited from participation due to not meeting the criteria.

Phil shared he was on lifetime parole. After serving 15 consecutive years, Phil was discharged from prison in 1994. He has had no parole violations since release. He is employed full-time in a local municipal position and is also a community activist. Disappointed, Phil shared, “really wanted to participate. I know it’s not you, but yet another rejection. Good work you are doing.”

Geoff disclosed that although he discharged in 2007, he was surrendered for a probation violation that reset his certificate of release date to 2010. He served a total of 17 years for drug possession and distribution. “I took back control of my life.” Geoff shared being employed full-time as an executive assistant.

Although eager to take part, Tony noted that he was able to get his conviction turned over from a felony to a misdemeanor. He served 4 years and discharged in 2001. “Although I did felony time, I don’t technically have a felony conviction anymore.” He is self-employed as an independent contractor for a sober house.
Table 1 provides an abbreviated summary of relevant demographics of the study participants. A more expansive view of the demographics is provided in the findings chapter of this study.

Table 1. Abbreviated Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Participants</th>
<th>Age at time of Study</th>
<th>Cumulative Time of Incarceration</th>
<th>Length of Criminal Desistance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conrad</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alvin</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>16 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>19 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelvin</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byron</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Length of criminal desistance is time accumulated after completing all requirements of community supervision (parole or probation) and receiving certificate of release.

Sample Size

For this study, data was collected from eleven (11) adult Black men who met the criteria for participation. Phenomenological research is concerned with meaning making of a small group of individuals, any where from 5 to 25 participants, sharing similar lived experiences (Cresswell, 2007). Additionally, qualitative research is not predicated on gathering information for the purpose to generalize. The emphasis is to make explicit the “particular, the specific” (Cresswell, 2007, p.126) of the experiences of the phenomenon being studied. Concentrating on their experiences of how they have desisted from crime, providing the opportunity to tune in to the phenomenon of and understand the “universal
“essence” (Cresswell, 2007, p.58) of their resilience and success, with particular attention to their complex identities and the daily challenges they encounter, the researcher, in consultation with her committee, and support from preliminary data analysis that revealed no new information being learned, concluded that a sample size of eleven participants was sufficient.

**Informed Consent**

At the time of the scheduled interview, informed consent (Appendix D) was reviewed with each participant and any questions answered. This review included: the purpose of the study; the rights of the participant to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time; right to confidentiality; statement regarding known risks associated with participation in the study including researcher’s responsibility as a mandated reporter; the anticipated benefits to the participants for taking part in this study; the time needed to complete the interview; and the plans for how the results of the interview will be used (Cresswell, 2007; Locke, Spirduso, Silverman, 2007).

After each participant signed the consent form, he was informed that if he had any questions during the interview to feel free to interrupt and ask, and was again reminded that participation was voluntary. The researcher also asked whether or not the participant had learned about the study from an agency where he receives services. This was to make sure that participants had been informed that (non) participation in this study would not impact services they receive from the agency. Of the eleven, none of the participants responded ‘yes’. Once permission was obtained, the participant was given a copy of the consent form. Before the interview began, the participant was also given the Emotional Support Resource List (Appendix G) and a $35 gift card as compensation for his participation in the study.
Protection of Human Research Subjects

Efforts to minimize risk to the study participants were maintained throughout the interview process. It is noted that offenders, those currently incarcerated in a correctional setting, are recognized a vulnerable population. Although the target population for this study identified as formerly incarcerated and have been out of prison for at least five years, it is recognized that participation in this study involved sharing sensitive, potentially discomforting, information about one’s lived experiences. Although participants were not asked to give information that could put them at risk for re-incarceration (e.g. details of criminal activity, known and unknown), the researcher did inform participants of her role as a mandatory reporter and reasons that would require breach of confidentiality and her duty to warn. At the onset of each interview, the researcher reminded the participant that if he began to share specific information sounding indicative or incriminating of criminal activity, he would be directed to stop.

Although not an issue that emerged, the researcher was fully aware that maintaining participants’ confidentiality could have been problematic if he were to disclose illegal activity, crimes for which he had not been arrested or other behaviors that would require mandated reporting. This disclosure would have posed a risk to participants’ legal and social standing. Harm could have taken the form of legal implications should a duty to protect had occurred. The researcher also acknowledged with each participant the risk of unintended consequences such as identifying as an ex-offender, the use of this term during the interview process, and the negative stigma and connotations associated with this label.

Responsible conduct for doing research requires that study participants be sufficiently supported. At the beginning of the interview, participants were reminded that participation in
this research study was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw from this study at any
time without being penalized in any way. Indication for consent was provided by each
participant placing an ‘X’ in the designated checkboxes on the consent form (Appendix D),
confirming his participation. As an individual with a history of former incarceration, the
researcher was attuned to the potential that reflection on and recollection of such life
experiences might provoke feelings and thoughts that could create emotional or
psychological distress. As a licensed independent clinical social worker with over two
decades of clinical practice experience, this researcher remained continuously aware, tuning
in to behaviors that were suggestive of discomfort. Throughout each interview, every effort
was made not to create or facilitate emotional harm or stress. This study followed ethical
guidelines reflective of those for informed consent. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of
Simmons College evaluated this research study and approval of the project was granted prior
to onset of any data collection. Oversight for the study was ongoing and monitored by the
researcher’s dissertation committee.

**Supportive Resources**

This research study used a sample population recruited from non-profit community
based human service agencies in Boston that provide support services, which include
individual and group counseling, to the ex-offender population. Some participants were
already receiving mental health support from these, and other (e.g. non-study related),
agencies. At the time of the interview, each participant was given a handout (Appendix G)
outlining steps to take in the event he should require additional support. Also, depending on
insurance coverage, participants were directed to contact the mental/behavioral health
provider for their health insurance or the mental/behavioral health services at Boston Medical
Center. Known for its provision of exceptional trauma and emergency services, Boston Medical Center is the largest safety-net hospital in New England. Boston Medical Center maintains a commitment to community-based care, with affiliations to fifteen community health centers located throughout the neighborhoods of Boston (http://www.bmc.org/about.htm).

Interview Protocol

Data collection in phenomenological studies primarily consists of in depth interviews with a small sample size (Cresswell, 2007). This methodology was supportive of a resilience and strengths conceptual framework, highlighting processes that facilitate well being despite adversity (Luthar & Brown, 2007). A face-to-face interview using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix E) was completed with eleven (11) participants. This researcher was the sole interviewer of all eleven participants. Participants were informed the interview would last for approximately 45 minutes, not to exceed 60 minutes. Cresswell (2007) recommends participants be asked, in a modified way appropriate for this study, the following two open, non-specific questions:

1. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? (p.61)

As evidenced by the protocol, questions asked were few and were structured in consideration of these recommendations. For example, participants were asked, “What have been your experiences in staying out of prison?” Probes also used to elicit descriptions included, “Who/what helped to keep you from returning to prison?” and “How are you able to keep yourself encouraged?” The questions, in particular, drew specific attention to gathering information that led to both a textural and structural description of the shared experiences
with desistance, and responses given provided an understanding of the common experiences of the study participants (Cresswell, 2007). These descriptions are provided in depth in the findings and discussion chapter of this research study.

Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcriber was required to sign a confidentiality agreement (Appendix F) prior to completing any interview transcriptions. The location for interviews varied based on access and convenience for the participant. Simmons College provided space that could be utilized. The researcher also had access to space at Wheelock College. Located centrally in Boston, both campuses provide relative privacy and anonymity for individuals to enter and exit the space. In addition to these locations, public access meeting rooms (e.g. public library) were also suggested in order to support ease of travel for participants. Of the eleven participants, interviews occurred in the following locations: (1) Wheelock College; (5) Boston Public Library branch; (2) public park in Boston in close proximity to their primary residence; and (3) in the workplace setting. For those interviews that took place in the workplace setting, this was at the request of the participant.

Before finalizing the location, the researcher stressed her commitment to protecting and preserving their privacy and confidentiality. Three study participants (Karl, Adrian, and Roger) chose their workplace setting as the preferred location for the interview. All confirmed a relative sense of privacy in their respective work environments given their professional position: supervisory capacity (Karl); and administrative position (Adrian and Roger). Similarly among all three, their professional roles require frequent meetings with undisclosed individuals. Essentially, non-descript people come and go from their workplace office with regularity and the researcher’s presence would not be viewed as conspicuous.
In compensation for sharing their experiences, study participants were given a $35.00 gift card for a regional grocer. This grocery store chain was selected as it has multiple locations across Boston and its surrounding communities and are typically easily accessible by car and public transportation.

**Data Analysis Strategy**

Remaining consistent and compliant with strategies that best support phenomenological research, the researcher utilized the following steps as outlined by Cresswell (2007) to analyze data collected from the research study (p.159):

- First describe personal experiences with the phenomenon (i.e. criminal desistance). This is the effort by the researcher to set aside personal experiences, acknowledging it can’t be done in entirety, but for the purpose of keeping the focus directed on and to the participants of this study.

- Develop a list of significant statements, quotes, and sentences that provide an understanding of the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon (*horizonalization of the data)*.

- Construct “meaning units”, or themes that are grouped together into larger units of information.

- Construct a textual description, “what” the participants in study experienced with the phenomenon – what happened, including verbatim examples.

- Construct a structural description, “how” the experience happened.

- Lastly, write a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textual and structural description, which captures the “essence” of the experience and represents the concluding aspect, a summary of the “what” and “how” of the participants’ experiences.

Each of these approaches was considered in the coding process, data analysis, summary of findings, and discussions section (chapters 4 and 5) of this research study.
After completion of each interview, the researcher listened to the audio recording alongside review of the transcribed file. Throughout this review process, the researcher completed memoing, or reflective journaling (Cresswell, 2007), as a way to capture reflections, thoughts, and judgments about the experiences being shared by the participants. Having grown up and lived in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester for over thirty years, exposure to this population through family and friends, and having a familiarity with many of the landmarks and local history revisited by some participants, the process of memoing proved invaluable to the researcher. Memoing provided the opportunity for the researcher to be cognizant of her own experiences with the phenomenon of criminal desistance and to stay conscious of ‘epoche’, bracketing and setting aside judgment about those experiences and perspectives about the data being gathered as much as it was feasibly possible (Cresswell, 2007). Listening to the interviews and reading through the transcriptions also provided the researcher with an overall impression about the data gathered during the data collection process. This thorough effort was evidence of the researcher’s commitment to stay focused on the study participants and preserving the essence about the experiences shared, achieving the purpose of this phenomenological research, integrating the “what” and “how” of participants’ shared experiences.

Given the overall impression the researcher developed during the review process of the audio and transcription files, analysis of the content gleaned began. Stories and comments shared by each participant relating to desistance, resilience, and strengths generated a particular code and were assigned to the appropriate thematic category. These initial codes were organized in association with the theoretical framework of this study, while others emerged as a result of the coding process, but did not result as significant (e.g. not
consistent among participants). In alignment with core aspects of phenomenological research to convey the spirit of the phenomenon, rich thick description (Maxwell, 2005) of interview passages are embedded throughout the findings and discussion chapter of this research study.

**Record Keeping**

The researcher maintained confidentiality of all study materials (signed informed consent; digital recording; interview protocol document; field notes). As the principal researcher and primary instrument for data collection (Maxwell, 2005), the researcher was the gatekeeper for all information collected. Participants provided a pseudonym for interview purposes. Any identifying information used to contact participants and conduct interviews such as names, telephone numbers, and addresses was not stored with the collected data. All data collected was (and is being) kept in a locked storage cabinet in the researcher’s office. All transcribed interviews were organized utilizing the qualitative software, *HyperResearch*. This software was selected given its usability on both Apple and Windows operating systems. Participant interviews were saved as text files, easily uploaded to the software for creation and coding of themes, and information conveniently retrieved for the purpose of generating lists of participant statements in relation to the identified themes.

Each participant interview recording and transcription was stored electronically on a password protected external hard drive and in a virtual data storage program, *Dropbox*. This virtual database requires a login and password of the originator. Files uploaded to the virtual storage are also encrypted using a secure Sockets Layer (SSL) and AES-256 bit encryption (https:www.dropbox.com/help/27/en). After each interview recording was completed, it was uploaded to *Dropbox* and then shared electronically with the transcriber. The transcriber only had access to audio files to which access was granted. Once the transcription was
completed, the transcriber uploaded the document to the Dropbox storage. The only individual having access to this uploaded document was the researcher.

All hard copy documents (i.e. criteria pre-screening; demographics portion of interview protocol) and research field and interview notes were electronically scanned and filed in the virtual data storage and the original paper copies stored in a locked storage cabinet. Files containing identifying information were stored separately in the locked cabinet from data collected during the interview. These files will be destroyed one year after the study has been completed.

**Validation Strategies**

A goal of qualitative research is to provide depth of understanding (Cresswell, 2007; 2013). This effort for deeper knowledge is typically gained from interactions with participants and the process of “probing to obtain detailed meanings” (Cresswell, 2013, p.243). Occurring simultaneously, or immediately following completion of a research study, a qualitative researcher may pose questions to evaluate one’s self and the quality of the research conducted and study findings (Cresswell, 2013).

Validity within the context of this phenomenological study aligned with Cresswell’s (2013) definition as it relates to qualitative research. “Validity in qualitative research [is] an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best defined by the researcher and the participants” (Cresswell, 2013, pp.249-250). Cresswell (2013) further notes validation as a “distinct strength” (p.250) of qualitative research in that “…detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to participants…all add to the value or accuracy of a study” (p.250). Furthermore, validation emphasizes a process and not verification of study findings (Cresswell, 2013).
Clarifying research bias. Awareness to researcher “bias” (Maxwell, 2005) and “reflexivity” (Cresswell, 2007; 2013) was an ongoing process. As a Black woman who grew up in a male-dominated environment, there is an affinity to and compassion for Black men. This researcher’s own lived experiences, having lived in and around Boston for over 40 years, were triggered by the stories being shared by the participants. At varying points throughout the interview process, different participants would share about experiences at a local community-meeting place (e.g. schools, neighborhoods, public transportation stops), historical happenings (e.g. bussing in Boston) and other familiar communal activities also memorable to the researcher. It was critical for the researcher to be an active listener, and not assume anything about the participants’ experiences.

Throughout the interviewing process, the researcher used memoing to remain aware of her own experiences and stay diligently cognizant to ‘epoche’, bracketing and setting aside judgment, as much as possible, about the stories being shared (Cresswell, 2007; 2013). Although acknowledging of familiar events, the researcher remained acutely aware of how questions were asked so as to not influence the responses of the participants or anticipate a particular response to the questions being asked and the experiences being shared.

Rich, thick description. Thick description is evidenced by descriptive recounts that the researcher provides when writing about a particular theme (Cresswell, 2013). Moreover, “a description is rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details” (Cresswell, 2013, p.252). Providing a detailed account of content shared by participants also allows the reader of this research to determine whether or not findings are transferable because of the shared commonalities among study participants (Cresswell, 2013). Use of rich, thick description has been incorporated throughout the findings chapter of this study.
Reliability. The ensure study reliability, study transcriptions were reviewed alongside the audio recording. Following each interview, the researcher listened to the recording. Once the interview was received back from the transcription service, the transcript was reviewed while also listening to the recording. This allowed the researcher to review the transcript for accuracy to the recording. Finally, during the coding process, although all interviews were uploaded to and accessible through the data analysis software, *HyperResearch*, the researcher referred to a hard copy of the interview transcriptions to ensure that descriptions embedded in the findings were correctly associated to the relevant participant.
Chapter IV

Findings
Introduction

As noted in the review of the literature, there is a need for identifying qualities and characteristics that illustrate and promote resilience and strengths, particularly among the Black male population (Teti et al., 2011). Additionally, remaining aligned with the transcendental approach to data analysis of phenomenological research, intentionally tuning in to ‘how’ participants experienced this phenomenon was paramount to study findings. Given their disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system, both on entry and in recidivism, it seems imperative to glean knowledge from those who have had experiences within this system and have been successful in not returning. Rich (2009) also underscores the critical importance of including the perspectives of this population, particularly as services and interventions are proposed and established. In addition, Rich (2009) highlights the critical importance and inherent value of intentional integration of the Black male experience and voice.

Giving attention to a population whose lived experiences have been contextualized by the social construction of race, dynamics of oppression and discrimination, and the judicial system and its policies, the paradigms of critical race theory and intersectionality also supports the need to review and deconstruct the experiences of marginalized populations and avoiding the homogenization of research findings (Alexander, 2010; Freeman, 2011; Murphy et al., 2009). One way that is suggested to do so is through capturing the voices of such groups, often inclusive of people of color, through storytelling. Hearing the stories of an ostracized group, formerly incarcerated adult Black men, and identifying similarities of lived experiences (i.e. themes), provides the opportunity to not only explore, but also gain, understanding of and insight to their lived experiences. As noted by Freeman (2011), it is
important to expand comprehension of the deliberate, and unintentional, ramifications of these many systems and dynamics, in efforts to prevent over generalization of those who are marginalized and vulnerable.

This chapter details the findings from face-to-face interviews completed with eleven participants. Each interview was 45-60 minutes long, with one (Kelvin) taking almost two hours. Each interview was directed by a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix E) focused around one direct question about participants’ criminal desistance and incorporating probes as needed. Interviews began with part II, the interview (see Appendix E). The researcher’s rationale was to begin the interview in a way that seemed naturally evolving.

Demographics were collected with a questionnaire at the end of the interview, part I (see Appendix E). The researcher’s reasoning was that rapport would seem more relaxed at this point given that participants would have just finished a conversation for 45-60 minutes with the interviewer. Report of the findings begins with getting to know each of the study participants.

**Commonalities among Participants**

As illustrated by table 2, several similarities among participants were identified. *Significant Other.* Over half of the participants, 6 out of 11, reported being in a relationship and having a significant other. *Children.* Seven participants noted they had at least one child. *Education.* Six participants reported being college educated at the Associate’s degree level or higher. Of this six, two disclosed having an earned Master’s degree. *Employment.* Of the eleven participants, 5 were employed at the time of interview. The six remaining participants volunteered information about their unemployment status: (2) permanently disabled; (1) recent job interview and awaiting response; (1) temporary disability status; (1) recently laid
off; and (1) actively engaged in job search. It is observed that the participants who were employed at the time of interview are those with an earned college degree, with the exception of one participant (who does have a degree) is permanently disabled and unable to work.

Table 2. Participant Similarities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Significant Other</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>College Degree</th>
<th>Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conrad</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alvin</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelvin</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byron</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Y= yes; N=no. A narrative of these findings is provided under 'commonalities among participants' as well as illustrative accounts under 'participant descriptions'.

Participant Descriptions

Conrad

Conrad is in his early 50’s. Having earned a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and being permanently disabled, he described himself as a self-educated man. He wanted to be a “social scientist…I wanted to study society from a layman’s point of view without all the book and the doctrines.” Felony convictions for which he served time included theft, robbery, and drug dealing stating, “all based primarily on my desire to achieve money.” He was very intentional to note, “I have no sex offenses…no pimping…I have too many female family members.” Conrad estimated his total amount of time spent in a correctional facility
as 13 years. He received his certificate of release in 2004. He is currently living with his significant other and has no children.

**Vincent**

Almost 60, Vincent is a married father of 3. He has an earned associate’s degree. Permanently disabled, he was deliberately emphasized, “*I have worked...most of my life. I was a cook for many, many years.*” He spent nearly half of his life, thirty years cumulative, in correctional institutions. He received his certificate of release in 2003. Convictions included unarmed and armed robbery, and burglary. As he talked about his experiences of being formerly incarcerated, his first statement was one of context, “*I think it’s important to give you an overview of how I was...sucked into the system. I lost my mother at a very early age.*”

**Marcus**

In his mid-50’s, Marcus has never married and is the single father of one. Currently unemployed, he is close to earning his Associate’s degree stating, “*I need a few more credits.*” He calculated his total cumulative time spent in the prison setting as 22 years. “*I’ve lived this life since the early 70’s...like 40 years and spent 22 years collectively in prison...on the installment plan...three years here, four here, six here, five here.*” He described himself as a teenager who associated with an older crowd. “*I was 17...always hung out with older guys in their 30s and 40s, living the fast life and...got introduced to that and...just started committing crimes.*” He received his certificate of release in 2004. Convictions were for bank fraud and “*uttering...passing a stolen check across the counter, receiving the funds*”, and forgery.
Alvin

In his late 40’s, Alvin is employed full-time and currently in a relationship. He has no children. Having an earned Associate’s degree he readily volunteered, “I was in my 40’s when I got here. Being in jail at my age, I’m like, what the hell is this? I should have did all of this shit when I was in my 20’s.” Alvin was convicted of larceny over $250, a felony conviction, and violation of a restraining order. “I knew what happened because I purposely did it. I did it by choice.” Because he violated his original probation sentence, he was surrendered and incarcerated. “They didn’t have to send me to jail. I know this for a fact. Why they did, I don’t even understand it.” He served his time “…eight months…” and received his certificate of release in 2007.

Stephen

Stephen is a single father of two. In his mid 40’s, he has never been married. Temporarily disabled, he has completed three years of college. He calculated his collective time served in prison as four years, “I would have cases…warrants…everywhere.” Felony convictions were for robbery, drug possession, and larceny over $250. He received his certificate of release in 1996 volunteering, “Because I haven’t been in trouble since ’96 I have a copy saying it’s [criminal record] sealed. I went and I called and they told me ‘if your record’s sealed you don’t have a record’…so I’m like all right, cool.”

Karl

In his mid-50’s, Karl is a married father of three. Employed full-time, he has recently completed his Master’s degree. Of this accomplishment he said, “I’m doing this, working two jobs, going to weekend college, and it was important to me not just to get that degree, but that I learn something.” When asked about his collective time served in prison, Karl
responded with slight laughter stating, “Jeez, that’s scary to even think about...damn...I hadn’t even really thought about this.” In total, he reported serving a collective eight years in prison. Convictions include gun charges, manufacturing cocaine, larceny over $250, forgery, uttering. In summary, Karl commented, “Yeah, I got a bunch of them. I can keep going on and on.” Although discharged in 1995, Karl clarified his certificate of release is dated 1998 due to unpaid probation fees. “I actually stayed on probation until...1998. I’m the guy who had a couple years probation beyond because I had to pay my probation fees. But I had not committed any crimes. It was ’98...when I was off probation...[and] I absolutely had nothing to do with them.”

Brent

Brent is a single, never married man in his early 50’s. He has no children. He is currently unemployed reporting, “I’m in between right now.” He has completed some college education. Brent calculated his cumulative time incarcerated as four years, with a certificate of release received in 1995. He describes this time accumulated having been incarcerated “just a couple of times...I made a few bad decisions” and also sharing “I didn’t want to do it, it was just peer pressure...peer pressure.” Convictions included stolen cars, “a lot of stealing cars” and robbery.

Adrian

Identifying as Black and noting his West Indian ethnicity, Adrian is in his early 40’s, the father of two, and currently in a relationship. He is employed full-time and has an earned Master’s degree. He quickly shared he was among the first group of offenders in Massachusetts to experience the mandatory minimum sentencing laws. “I was one of the first in the pipeline of getting the mandatory sentence.” He continued, “I got the ten year
mandatory sentence…the time to a day...for drug trafficking...so I got ten and a day. The interesting dynamic for me...was that I was a first time, non-violent drug offender...had no juvenile background.” Adrian received his certificate of release in 2001, having served a full ten years and one day.

Kelvin

In his mid 50’s, Kelvin described his relationship as ‘other’ and has no children. An independent contractor who works with the criminal justice system, he has an earned GED and has completed some college. He equated his time served in the various levels of the criminal justice system as earned degrees. “Walpole...my bachelor’s degree. Colorado...a federal prison...that would be considered your PhD because...there is nowhere after that. I received a Master’s ‘cause I’d...been to Walpole...Norfolk...Concord...Billerica...12 of the 18 Massachusetts correctional facilities...so I had been to all of the spots so I’m good...I survived.” Convictions included robbery, firearm possession, and drug-related crimes.

Having served a cumulative total of 18 years inside prisons, Kelvin received his certificate of release in 2006. Given the work he’s currently doing within the criminal justice system, he reflected on his time served as preparation stating, “Prison just was the proving ground...development of my speaking and realizing I have a gift of communication that I can assist and help people.”

Roger

Roger is a divorced father of two in his early 50’s. He has an earned Bachelor’s degree and is self-employed in human services. Of all the participants, he has served the least amount of time in a correctional setting. “I’ve been locked up for short periods of time...arrested three, maybe four times in my lifetime.” Despite his minimal time in prison,
he shared the experience of “losing my brother to the system. They [police] wouldn’t let him go until they got him.” His brother has been incarcerated for 47 years, and although he has been eligible for parole, his brother has refused to admit guilt in the crime for which he was convicted, adamantly stating, “I didn’t do it.” Roger stated believing in his brother. “To this day, I asked my brother one time, ‘did you do it?’ He said ‘no’, I never asked again.”

Describing his brother’s incarceration as a “long time deterrent”, Roger conceded moments of poor judgment that led to his involvement with the criminal justice system. Felony convictions included assault on a police officer and drug-related offenses. Roger shared an insightful perspective about his time in correctional settings, “Compared to some, my time served is negligible…two months…but what the bigger piece is once you get locked into the system it doesn’t matter if you have an extensive CORI or a little CORI, you get locked in...for a particular crime, assault and battery....drugs...you get labeled on paper.”

Roger received his certificate of release in 1990.

Byron

In his early 40’s, Byron has three children and is currently in a relationship. He has completed some college and is presently unemployed. Byron calculated his total time of incarceration at ten years, “ten years, easy…and other time you’ve done waiting for cases to turnover...where you’re not convicted, you’re just sitting.” At the time of this interview, Byron had just reached the five-year post-incarceration mark. Sharing reflectively about being where he is in his efforts to stay out of prison, Byron noted, “Everything went in my past, everything. I’ve held guns, shot guns, shot at people, been shot at...it’s crazy. And...it’s definitely a 360 going on here. And it’s...definitely humbling, especially coming from a time where if...you need...money you just go get it. You had the things that were necessary but
still the way you got the money wasn’t good. I’m in a different place…the whole criminal thinking just needed to go.” Byron received his certificate of release in 2009. When asked about felony convictions, Byron reported “for the most part, the charges have all been violent charges…assault, weapons…with the things I’ve done in my past I’m happy that I actually haven’t went as far as killing somebody.”

**Risk and Resilience**

**Internal and External Factors**

Unique to the social work profession, the ecological (person-in-environment) perspective is a central lens through which a social work practitioner gains insight and understanding of a person’s behavior and functioning. Individuals are influenced both negatively and positively by the dynamics and interconnected nature of their human relationships and surrounding environment. A goal of this study was to identify internal and external factors that promote desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men. In the effort to illuminate traits of resilience, which can also be noted as protective factors, the interview process also simultaneously uncovered risk factors, those challenges and barriers the men encountered in their efforts to desist from crime. Both risk and protective factors emerged as internal (one’s own intrinsic processes) and external (interpersonal, environmental dynamics). These findings affirm the idea as noted by Greene and Livingston (2012) that in efforts to evaluate resilience accurately, it is important to also be cognizant of the confluent effects of the many systems in which a client interacts.

The findings of this research begin with a highlight of themes, representative of risk factors, that surfaced from the participants’ narratives: adverse life events; addiction; environmental indignities; and unfair and unequal treatment. The men’s narratives reflect the
interlaced nature of both internal and external risk factors. Lastly, these factors resonate with those noted in literature (Greene, 2012) recognizing traumatic life experiences, loss, difficult life shifts, and multiple environmental stressors and pressures as risk factors.

**Risk Factors**

Each interview began with asking the participant the broad question, “What have been your experiences in staying out of prison?” Participants were invited to start their stories from a place of comfort, beginning where they felt most at ease in sharing about their experiences. All began with a response providing some historical context, usually inclusive of their early development years (i.e. early to mid-adolescence), which they felt contributed to how they subsequently became involved in the criminal justice system.

**Adverse life events.** As participants shared their narratives, each talked about a broad array of adverse experiences in early life. This theme is descriptive of life events related to: childhood loss; mental and/or emotional distress; and experiences described by participants in their own words as ‘trauma’ or ‘traumatic’.

Experiences shared by each participant were resonant of what can only be described as life altering. For the men, acknowledging how incarceration provided the opportunity to, if nothing else, be reflective about their life to that point, all shared about how they felt certain events were directly correlated to their eventual path towards imprisonment. For some, even in light of positive early life experiences, the life course still seemed destined towards prison.

Conrad spoke about the environment in which he was reared and the expectations he felt were held about him. Exposure to an array of factors, an undiagnosed mental health
disorder, and sibling loss were all contributory to his criminal activity and eventual incarceration.

“I’m from a matriarch-dominated family. They don’t like weakness…if you're weak or as they say 'sorry', they will let you know. I…now know…I suffer…from being bipolar. So some of my manic stages and then the self-medication [drugs] of that have taken me from being…a productive member of society--to being on the outskirts…a pariah. After I lost a sibling…I was depressed. So psychological background plays an integral part. Integral.”

Throughout the interview process Vincent frequently referenced the loss of his mother to suicide when he was 13 years old and this, in addition to subsequent life events, became the platform for his life “going into a tailspin.”

“She was 35 and I was 13… And my siblings and I…were thrust into the foster home system. And these were very…negative…very bad experiences. My father was an alcoholic, so I…knew the state was going to step in and take us. So I ran, which would become the story of my life. I was…very bitter for a long time. I was very angry for a very, very long time.”

The lack of parental involvement during his formative years was significant for Marcus. He disclosed,

“When I was growing up my father wasn’t around. My father was a drug addict/pimp. My mother was not in the [street] life, but always working. Then she remarried my stepfather. He was a working class guy but I used to come home from school and him and four…five of his friends would be sitting around the table with…coke…dope, alcohol, weed. He [stepfather] died in 1997. That was a bad year for me. My father died, like three of my best friends that same year…it was a tough year. I keep all of that negative stuff up front because I saw a lot coming up as a kid.”

Karl spoke about instability that began in his early years and continued throughout much of his early adult life.

“My life began of insanity. My mom passed away in 1970. So from 1970 to 1973 or so, I literally can’t remember alot. I remember running away from where I lived…and I…stepped right into it as a young person, 16, 17 years old. It was a lifestyle that I was already being primed and primmed for just from being around gang affiliations…as a young kid. Life continued to just spiral out. Within that 20-year time period [1975-1995], there’s a lot of things
that happened, a lot of losses.”

For Brent, the idea of being incarcerated was familiar – an experience that many family members had been through. Exposure to this, in addition to an absent relationship with his parents, and the subsequent death of his mom, influenced his decisions that led to future imprisonment.

“Most of my uncles and cousins been to prison. Not having a real…father…I had a step-dad. My mother was an alcoholic…and he [my father] tried to get me, and he couldn’t. So dealing with that, mother being an alcoholic, and then a step-dad. I did my own thing pretty much…and I made a few bad decisions. Peer pressure…the neighborhood…gangs, and succumbing to peer pressure. And my mom had passed while I was in jail, so that was tough, too. After that, I resorted to the streets because that’s what I know…and I lived the street life even as a kid.”

Adrian spoke about experiences of feeling unsafe during his adolescent years that ultimately influenced his future involvement with crime.

“I went on to high school, which became…difficult…because… I was out of my district…we [friends] are targets. And so there began the biggest landslide, I would say…in…who I became attitude wise and as a person. All the risks that I faced…people chasing me…wanting to rob me. I never forget…this was 1981. I was walking…and a gentleman approached me, asked me for my [stuff]. I…was like ‘No, I’m not giving you my [stuff].’ And he pulled out a gun and put it to my head…I was 11 years old. He started pushing me into an alley. And so that was very traumatizing for me. I never had no way of…processing that. So all of these things I realized were compound -- impacting things in my life, from that to losing friends. And it got worse and worse…as I became a part of the street life. The trauma became worse…whether it be seeing people be injured, injuring people…getting shot at. Just all that stuff…that began to warp my whole…view of life.”

Kelvin spoke introspectively about loss from a socio-historical perspective. Growing up during the civil rights movement, he spoke about how the loss of civil rights activists and supporters, compounded by the grief from the loss of a childhood pet, set the stage for how he would cope with emotional events which ultimately instigated criminal activity.
“[T]he loss of Dr. King…John F. Kennedy, Robert F., I didn’t understand how to deal with loss. So when I come home one day from school and looked for Lady…my dog… because she always would find me…eventually [family said] ‘Lady left.’ ‘Where did she go?’ ‘She had to go.’ ‘Go where?’ They didn’t tell me and I don’t think they understood how important it was to me to have clarity as to why people and things die like that, all of a sudden or be gone. [D]uring that time I began to look out to the streets a lot more for acceptance or for a place, which I felt had been taken from me from the death, assassination, murder of those three, four men…Medgar Evers, many others…Kennedy, that…whole era right there. So I was…swallowing or holding down stuff…just took it…and I didn’t know how to deal with it.”

For Stephen, although he grew up with both his mother and father who’ve been married for over 45 years, he described a very estranged relationship with his father that he felt led to his engaging in street life and eventually criminal activity.

“[Growing up] I despised my father because I had all sisters and he used to cater to them and I would catch hell.”

Roger shared about the impact of his brother’s incarceration and experiencing this as “traumatic.” For Roger, it was this trauma that influenced poor later life decisions leading to involvement with the criminal justice system.

“Since 14 years old…I watched my brother three years older than I…be dogged by police. I watched my brother grow old in prison. I watched my mother do time [metaphorically] with my brother. She is eighty five now and she has been in prison with my brother since he was seventeen.”

**Addiction.** Substance abuse and addiction materialized as a very salient theme in participants’ stories. Stories shared by the men talked about substance use as a method of coping in addition to how the environmental influences (i.e. family, friends, home, community surroundings, peer pressure, stress) provoked their use and abuse of substances, and was closely related to their incarcerations as well as beginning efforts to desist from crime.
Conrad noted how important the environment was to getting clean and maintaining his sobriety.

“\[\text{I was put into a position of responsibility and in a clean environment. And that lasted for...six, seven years. And then I fell back into my substance abuse. And I've since gotten clean of that.}\]

When asked to define what he meant by “clean environment” Conrad responded,

“When an ex-offender who has come from the urban environment Dorchester, Roxbury, Mattapan…there are outside forces that daily contributed to their psyche that preceded them getting involved with the criminal justice system. Unlike certain communities in the suburb, when you walk out your door in certain environments in greater Boston, your whole mind has to change into a protective mentality, into an aggressive mentality.”

Vincent talked about how not only the death of his mother, but his father’s alcoholism and subsequent death, facilitated his involvement with substances.

“[M]y father was an alcoholic, so I kind of knew the state was going to step in and take us [after mother’s death]. So I ran, which would become the story of my life, so to speak. This environment that I moved in was a very permissive environment. In fact, my friend’s mother was a prostitute. His aunt was a major heroin dealer. And I...fell into that lifestyle...was introduced to that negative lifestyle very, very early.”

He went on to share how this was his road to prison,

“I realized...I had a habit. Heroin is very, very addictive. I didn’t know what it was -- at the time, I’m 13 years old. That began a life of crime and I subsequently end up in prison.”

Vincent explained further about the influence of the environment, and how it impacted his recovery efforts.

“When I left prison, I went to a drug program, but I was back in the community. And I sort of wore that experience like a badge of honor...these were all the negative factors. So I went to prison, I came out...and...I probably was out three hours before I was high on heroin again.”
Marcus disclosed his substance use history saying,

“[It] was in 1975. I chose the street life and it landed me in jail about seven, eight different times, in the state penitentiary. And when I got out I started indulging in heroin...”

Stephen divulged how he became involved in illicit substance use, which ultimately led to criminal behavior and was a barrier in his efforts to avoid incarceration.

“So I did heroin by accident. It wasn’t like I set out to do heroin. I was with a group of people and I thought it was cocaine and they passed it to me, I snorted it, it was heroin. When I left [prison] in ’96 I said this is it, this is the last time you’ll see me. I didn’t do the things I used to do [but] I continued to get high.”

Karl talked about his adolescent and young adult years of literal non-stop use of drugs and alcohol sharing,

“As a young person…I began to drink, do other drugs and do a whole lot of other things…and it became habitual after a while. I was sniffing heroin…sniffing coke, drinking.”

Brent spoke about the ready availability of and access to drugs and early efforts at sobriety.

“Rock cocaine was really prevalent…and I got into that [dealing] real heavily. And then I started using. So after that, programs. Years of programs, in and out of programs, homelessness, whatever, shelters, before I finally got serious. That was a crazy period in my life.”

Kelvin shared how substance use was a coping mechanism in his life and was a direct link to his frequent incarcerations.

“I needed the alcohol…because it started to make sense with alcohol. At least it didn’t hurt anymore. That was a contributing factor to going back and forth to the system many times because…whenever I didn’t feel all right…that’s a good reason to get a drink or smoke some weed. I was introduced to cocaine, and then heroine, and then crack. From ’86 to ’89 I tested the streets [drugs] real hard. I would end up back in either jail or sleeping somewhere in a hallway.”
A former firefighter, Roger spoke about how experiencing racism and discrimination on the job was the impetus to his use of substances as a way of coping.

“The first five years, 1983 to 1989…I was living and moving on the moral fabric that I was given by my mother, to stand and do right. But five years of day to day, hand to hand combat in the firehouse, three attempts to take my life in fire buildings, fire situations, pulling resources out, leaving me in, those were attempts on my life…the beginning of alcoholism, addiction, coping. And after five years my coping method was drinking, smoking…or emotional strife and turmoil…I found myself reaching for escape. That’s alcoholism, cocaine addiction…physical confrontation with the men in that firehouse. That’s what led me…to the first real confrontation with the criminal justice system.”

**Environmental and structural indignities.** This research concentrated solely on interviewing adult Black men given their disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system. At the start of each interview, each time the researcher reviewed the study purpose, each participant essentially asked the interviewer, “Why are you doing this?” All seemed both genuinely curious, yet cautiously skeptical, about the researcher’s motives for wanting to not just talk with Black men, but specifically formerly incarcerated Black men. This apprehension was understood through participant sentiments that denoted a tone suggesting there is no genuine care or concern for the needs of formerly incarcerated individuals, particularly Black men. Furthermore, ten of the eleven participants spoke in depth about their viewpoints indicative of the historical and ongoing indignities this population continually combats: the legacy of slavery; dynamics of racism and oppression; systemic injustices; and perpetuated social stereotypes, all which they perceive influence the problem of incarceration among Black men.

In acknowledgement of participants’ hesitancy and to facilitate an atmosphere of trustworthiness and remain aware of her own biases, the researcher shared generally about her own lived experiences which promoted her affinity to and compassion for this
population. Participants seemed appreciative of what was disclosed and provided responses that were authentic, yet unapologetic.

Kelvin shared his observations about race and incarceration.

“You are in a social environment that has been manufactured to produce…statistics, information. Even as much as overt racism…I could almost say there is a sense…an element that purposefully pursues people of color because they make great inmates. They make great workers.”

Providing a similar sentiment, Byron commented,

“What do you expect from these people who keep going in this circle, back and forth to prisons…hardship and poverty? You keep them in this circle by not giving them…opportunity, by making it the norm in this society that persons with CORI’s [criminal offender records inquiry] aren’t qualified or can’t be qualified. Engaging us as an industry, that’s an industry too. It’s beginning to be that way. From the institutions, to the courthouse, to the health services…because we gotta keep some [offenders] so we have a job.”

Roger also spoke to the social environment, integrating his perspective of how history has influenced the dynamics seen in present day.

“For me it was a matter of truly being impacted by social structure. I have always been very, very sensitive to the societal stereotype of me. I found myself being truly treated like a 1960’s little nigga boy. It’s only hindsight that allows me to look back and see the systemic process that had been practiced from days of slavery. Sending those negative affirmations…those undermining references to one’s usefulness…self-esteem…viability…those…psychological assaults on… [a] black man’s psyche. From a child, black men have been assaulted, to beat them down, to keep them in a small box and that was something that was perpetrated right there at that fire department…it was more overt, it was right in your face. You either cowered or you went toe to toe, nose to nose with it. But…when I was dealing with that…I felt like I was doing battle by myself against the giant.”

Vincent talked about how he believes history has significantly impacted the current social structure that, from his point of view, directly influences the problem of incarceration and the intentional subjugation of Black men.

“This is rooted in the institution of slavery…the…major tenets of slavery was the prohibition of the slave to read or write, OK? Keep a man ignorant, you’ll
keep him in his condition. And so many of us [black men] have been afflicted with an inferiority complex."

Conrad spoke directly to the issue of racism and the pressures experienced in his process of desisting from crime.

"[B]eing an African-American man, I hate it when just because the skin color, unnecessary burdens are placed upon us."

Alvin talked about how the social depictions and stereotypes about Black men make the process of desisting challenging.

"You’re all seen the same…the drug dealer, that…fathered…four or five baby-mamas. It’s the worst…it is. And even the correction officers, they see you that way too. You know what I’m saying? So it’s hard, mentally, again, from being incarcerated, from day one, to getting out."

Stephen shared a similar perspective, focusing on what he feels is missing in mainstream images of Black men and how this absence seems intentional and a direct connection to increased imprisonment among Black men noting,

“We didn’t see…the professional black - middle/upper class, educated, well established...images. That’s what’s missing. And people say how do you keep people from going back [to prison]? Well, my thing is how do you keep them from going? And if you pay attention to what’s happening they’re privatizing these jails, it’s a business now. So they’re making money off of incarceration now. And who easiest to incarcerate than the disenfranchised?”

Marcus provided an insightful comment about the function of parole and probation commenting,

“I always look at it -- probation and parole--like a catch. It's just a matter of time before you back. And you may get a PO [probation/parole officer] that doesn't care for you. Like I went to see my PO one day and he looks me up and down and he said, ‘How can you afford shoes like those? I can't afford shoes like those and I'm working.’ So it's that type of stuff [viewed as less than, not deserving] you’ve got to deal with.”

Brent talked about the issue of race and employment from a perspective of being able
to work and be self-sufficient.

“Low work wages and race…a problem. Like, the CORI [criminal offender records inquiry]. That blocked me for a long time. I couldn’t get a job…and it was so tough. I couldn’t get just a regular job -- just a regular job -- because of that.”

Adrian acknowledged that although he was brought up with “good values…my mother tried to instill good values”, the influence of the community, and the reality of the surrounding environmental dynamics (e.g. ongoing exposure to drugs, crime, violence) cannot be underestimated; the lack of societal acknowledgement along with no provision of resources had significant ramifications.

“The street corner value system was the most important value system…because that was the value system of survival. Dorchester…a pretty high profile area for drug activity…labeled…the death corridor. The allowance for the level of mental and psychological incarceration only is bound to certain communities. So let’s take an example. When I was growing up, a young man named Walter was a friend…in my homeroom class. Sixth grade [Walter] got killed by the police. Went to school the next day, no big deal, wanted us to just work on class. Walter’s seat is absent. Something happens in Columbine, Newtown, anywhere else, the whole school, the whole town shuts down…and provides psychological services for these kids. Because they understand that this one incident of trauma could derail the rest of the future of every young person --whether they were directly impacted, not impacted, hear about it, just the exposure. But day after day, young black children in urban America are constantly exposed to trauma in their home, at their school, in their neighborhood. Never a shutdown day…to say, ‘we need to make sure that they don’t stuff this stuff to the point where it deforms their character and derails their future.’”

Unfair and unequal treatment. The researcher was interested in knowing the participants’ perspective on professional helpers (e.g. social workers) and their thoughts on what they think trained practitioners need to be considerate of when working with the formerly incarcerated Black male population. The researcher solicited responses from each participant asking, “What do you think professionals can do to help support Black men to not return to prison?” Each participant shared a thoughtful and insightful response noting
qualities such as understanding; hopefulness; encouragement; active listening; and being nonjudgmental. The men offered the following perspectives.

Conrad

“They...have to have a sense of understanding that a black man who has been incarcerated one to numerous times has a sense of lacking. The social worker has to have some sort of psychiatric...understanding...of the psychosis that goes along with a individual who've been incarcerated...and be able to...accept them at that moment for who he...is.”

Vincent

“They ought to acknowledge and recognize...that [they] are dealing with a person who is coming out with a tremendous amount of anxiety...because you live in constant fear when you’re in prison. Issues that professionals are going to have to deal with people who are coming out of jail, specifically if they spent...10 or more years in prison...a person who’s going to need a tremendous amount of therapy because it has a tremendous psychological effect on you, you know what I mean? You come out here...and you’re living on high alert. That social worker...or...psychologist...in terms of their strengths...skills...they need to engage...needs to listen with a critical ear.”

Marcus

“[B]eing very patient with me...I can go in there and...put all my cards on the table and he [provider] can relate to it...he just knows what...I’m...going through because he’s been working with us [population] for so long. And not being judgmental.”

Alvin

“My biggest pet peeve about this whole process, getting on my feet...you walk into one of these agencies and automatically, they’re not really feeling what you went through, or what you have accomplished, or what you decide that you want to accomplish. They automatically think that you’re a hood rat...uneducated...don’t know how to read...have 10 kids somewhere...on drugs. They should really get to know the person...know a little bit more about their background and what they’re capable of doing.”

Stephen

“They’re so money oriented now with these programs. Everybody’s trying to make a dollar. Nobody’s trying to help anybody. So, the first thing...is...listen...tell ’em life is not over...you can turn this thing around no
matter how old you are. I would focus more on, like, encouraging. It’s nice, the formal training, the therapeutic. All that’s all well and good but if you don’t give a person hope that things are going to be different, like hope that you can still make it out of this, hope that you can still have a productive life, if you don’t give them that then everything else is meaningless. None of it means anything to them. Stress there’s hope…hope is the key.”

Karl

“People know when you talk from your heart; they hear it, they understand, they know you get it, there’s nothing fake about that. So…working with people incarcerated…sympathy is good in some areas, but…empathy is powerful. Meeting people where they’re at…understanding that people have other barriers…just because I look OK on the outside doesn’t mean I’m OK. People being comfortable enough to let you know some of their fears…meeting them at a place where you recognize…respect…and…try to help them from there. [H]aving compassion is one thing, but doing something for somebody, that’s a part of compassion.”

Brent

“It’s never hopeless. Connection is good, you know. And a lot of them [programs] just think they [offenders] don’t have no souls and what-not. People look at everything else instead of…looking at their well-being.”

Adrian

“Give people a chance. If you’re not able to support them with being able to filter…and…and understand what those experiences really mean…then it reshapes their disposition and attitude toward life. [W]e have to understand…transformation is how…we restore the humanity in people…instead of penalizing them younger and younger.”

Kelvin

“I had…been to…psychologists. They always wanted to give you the pictures…ink blot stuff and…at the end of the day I stopped investing because there was nothing on the other side of it. [I needed] someone who brought an understanding of what my reality was, maybe more than just the didactical, more than just the educational…it wasn’t connecting. That’s why so many of the books that are on re-entry now lack punch…because they are not based on experience. They are based on statistics and some stuff that they think people might want to hear. Patience or tolerance are going to be key as they go through the first months….years of release.”
Roger

“Humbled by the fact that they [ex-offenders] realize…they have gone afool of society and they know that they have to come back into main stream society, they are willing to submit. But if the initiative…program managers and directors…different political structures…say ‘we support the reintegration processes—we will develop these programs for this demographic’, if those entities are not sincere, we can say that…all these initiatives is…a weak link. You have men who apply for and try to engage these reintegration initiatives but when they actually get to the point where the rubber has to meet the road and have done what you’re asking them to do, you as a hiring entity…say that his CORI will not allow me to bring him into my agency. They put thousands of dollars of federal monies into training this person but when they send him out to the employer that employer is saying ‘Oh no, we’re not taking him.’ This person needs to look at this ex-offender, believing in him and then, after they have invested and trained him they need to support him and…go forward to the hiring agency and say ‘you gotta work with this guy.’

Byron

“You have these people that sit before you trying to talk to you about problems and they don’t know anything…and they think they know about your problems by reading a text book. You’ve got a lot of the mental stuff going on…that keeps this circle going. They don’t want to budge from their old process of thinking. You have people without CORIs who do worse things than people with CORIs. This whole process…it’s not beneficial to us [ex-offenders]; it’s just keeping a paycheck for a certain…people. There is not really anyway you can get over that, and that’s unfortunate, because here it is you have this person that served their time…and it’s not up to you [society] to resentence them…or serve as some type of roadblock so that they can’t successfully get past that.”

Protective Factors

As participants disclosed life histories of adverse life events, addiction, indignities, and unfair treatment, they also concurrently shared stories of how they’ve dealt with these stressors and challenges. The men talked about how they have effectively managed on a day-to-day basis and continue to desist from crime. To elicit descriptive responses, participants were prompted, as needed, by some or all of the following questions: “Who/what helped to keep you from returning from prison? How did this make a difference?” What/who supported
your ability to move forward? How are you able to keep yourself encouraged? What is it about you that have helped you to be successful and not return to prison? What/who motivates you to stay out of prison?” Protective factors, indicative of resilience and one’s resiliency, became distinctly apparent. The following themes materialized: spirituality; formal and informal supports; sobriety; integration and growth through adversity; and giving back. These findings also overlap with protective factors such as spirituality, relatedness and caring, self-esteem, and the capacity to attribute meaning to life experiences as described in the literature (Greene, 2012).

**Spirituality.** The men talked about how spirituality (i.e. higher power, God) was instrumental to their initial internal decision to stop offending and not return to prison. Some also talk about how this relationship has remained central to their commitment to not re-engage with behaviors or activities that could put them at risk for returning to a correctional setting.

Conrad talked about how spirituality has helped him to see that, despite years of incarceration, his life has purpose.

“I've learned from my incarceration time the value of spirituality. [E]ven though I've had some checkered moments since I've been released, my spirituality always allowed me to believe that a higher power had a purpose and a plan for me that brought me into the prison system, survive the prison system and back out alive in fairly good health. So…I don’t want to let my higher power down this time.”

Having lost his mother at 13 and father at 14, Vincent spoke very passionately and emotionally about the journey of healing he’s gone through, continued efforts to repair relationships with his now adult children, and how he is motivated by a promise he made to God upon his last release from prison.

“When I got out…and this may sound cliché…I made a pact with God that…I
wasn’t going to go back. And I got to tell you, it was close...been close a couple times. It’s not close now. I have been tremendously blessed [reestablished relationship with children] and I never neglect to count that blessing on a daily basis.”

Stephen talked about an answered prayer from God and relationships that he believes turned his life around.

“I was in rehab and...I was completely broken...and I said to God ‘If you just help me one more time I’ll get out of my own way.’ And it was like an overnight transformation...definitely God.”

Karl spoke about an answer to prayers.

“God did something for me. He turned some things around. I guess he must have been hearing other people’s prayers for me...and hearing mine. And they were answered.”

Roger emphasized how a former connection facilitated a spiritual relationship that has been transformative and critical to his desistance

“[S]omeone from my past, showed up...threw himself at me like a rope...told me to hold on...and I ended up at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ.”

Brent shared about his relationship with God and how this has helped him to stay out of prison.

“God has always been there. When I ask for help...He got to [help] at some point in time.”

Adrian also shared about his spiritual journey and where he landed.

“Who think they’re so powerful that they don’t realize that you too need something greater than you to keep you in check? I went on this journey of really trying to figure out...faith. I ended up...being a Muslim in Islam. So why am I saying this? I’m saying that I know that the first sustaining pillar of my being here, having this conversation with you, is spirituality. If I look at people who’ve transformed their lives...from prison, alcoholism, drug addiction, whatever...the line that runs through everyone’s...sustainability has been faith. So...why haven’t we found a way to incorporate...the significance of faith in the journey of transformation?”
Kelvin talked about how his relationship with God changed his life and gave him a sense of purpose.

“I got on my knees and I said, ‘God, I just need you to come into my life.’ So I get up and I’m thinking, ‘It’s going to get better. God, help me get back to a life of helping people.’ So I say [to myself], ‘You’re dragging me now so my pains, my struggles, they…have a purpose.’ ”

Staying focused on God, and not others, helped Byron get to where he is in staying out of prison.

“God is the thing that keeps me accountable…helps me approach…engage the world…that’s my foundation. You might not follow it straight all the way but at least that can help pull you back in when you waver from it a little bit. I don’t fear going forward with that belief in God. When you get with God’s agenda you know things change. You start to really see how things supposed to be.”

**Formal and informal supports.** This theme is inclusive of both formal (i.e. counseling, agency services, structured programs) and informal (i.e. a sponsor, family, friends) relationships that participants identified as important and supportive to their process of desisting from crime.

Vincent talked about relationships, some through agencies that were helpful to his not going back to prison.

People helped me [Span]…I can’t say enough about them…and other people in the community. Brothers in the community who were doing well…they really embraced me. And I thought that was wonderful that finally brothers are helping brothers."

Marcus shared about what has been most helpful to him in his efforts to remain out of prison.

“My main support system is the one on one counseling. I've been successful…having different counselors. I've got like three…four counselors that I can rely on, call any time for support, and that helps a lot. I'm surprised, it really helps a lot.”
For Alvin, the experience of trying to gain formal support was a barrier. He continued, sharing what was helpful in his process of desistance.

“As far as agencies, I didn’t get no kind of help. The…list of…resources that you’ve given me, it seems…that when you do go to reach out…I…think it’s just a big numbers game as far as…well, ‘we have ‘em’…I’m just another number. In order to keep this agency funded…[they] have to have numbers. There’s absolutely no help. Throughout the process, it was a lot of encouragement…resources that was given to me... by my family and friends. At the end of the day, they was there…I had a home to go back to.”

Stephen spoke about why some supports (informal) seemed to work better for him than others (formal supports).

“I have good people [parents, children, sponsor] in my life. Everybody’s trying to make a dollar. Nobody’s trying to help anybody. That’s the beauty of AA for me. The formal training, the therapeutic, all that’s…good but if you don’t give a person hope that things are going to be different…that you can still make it out of this…can still have a productive life, then everything else is meaningless. None of it means anything.”

Karl highlighted the value of friendships and connecting with formal resources.

“I had some friends that sort of adopted me into their family. They were clean and had been clean for a while. I met these people and that’s where I began to change some of the old people. My work history began as a result of being in a program that I got into. They help men that were in the position that I was in.”

Brent talked about a family member who has been there as he’s changed his life.

“My cousin…he seen that I have some potential. He believes in me. And I mean, everybody, at some point, have to be helped. Connection is good.”

Byron noted his encountering more barriers from formal supports than assistance.

“My experiences were…a lot of roadblocks…and …a lot of fluff and talking. You have a lot people who say there’s so many resources out there…that are designed to help guys like me that are coming out of the prison system. These places are hard. I spent…two years trying to come across places like this…my own footwork or research on the internet. It’s been hard because…you get to these places…and their not actually helping in the way you thought they would help.”
Sobriety and recovery. Of the eight participants who shared about struggles with addiction, six expressed how formal and informal supports (i.e. detox programs, Alcoholics Anonymous, having a sponsor, counseling support) were essential, and remain ongoing, to maintaining their sobriety. Juxtaposed to the addiction to an illicit substance, a noteworthy observation is that of Alvin, who talked about how being a cigarette smoker has been instrumental to his desisting from crime and staying out of prison.

Conrad talked about what helps him to stay sober and he shared,

“When I'm on my medication, I'm able to stay into sobriety. I got Mass Health and now I'm a lot better because I can afford my medication. I'm able to see life on life's daily terms.”

As for staying clean now, Vincent shared about the importance of support services and even the challenge of making the decision to seek support.

“I sought out some therapy and...for black folks...going to psychiatrists and psychologists, that's taboo for us, you know? But I had to do something...I needed...to talk about some of the trauma in my life. Specifically, I had never really dealt with the suicide of my mother or the fact that my father died almost a year to the day from cirrhosis of the liver.”

Marcus disclosed what prompted him to get clean and where he is now in his recovery sharing,

“I woke up...and said, ‘I can't do this.’ So I went to the methadone program and I stayed on that for four years and I just weaned myself off of the heroin and I’ve been doing good ever since. I'm coming up on...this October it’ll be five years for me.”

In contrast to the other participants and how substance abuse activated a course towards crime and eventual incarceration, Alvin talked about how being a cigarette smoker has been a motivation to avoid imprisonment.
“One of the worst things for me is to stop smoking, not being able to smoke when I want to smoke…this is welcoming to me. It’s just the little things like that, I just don’t want taken away from me. That motivates me.”

When asked about what helped him to get and stay sober, Stephen shared,

“For me, I found…AA…and…latched onto a group of people who didn’t seem to be doing the same thing again. And it’s been working. I just didn’t want to do it again…didn’t want to abandon my kids again…didn’t want to be homeless again, I didn’t want to steal from my parents again…steal from my sisters again. I didn’t want to be in jail again. It wasn’t the ‘yets’, it was the ‘agains’ for me. Now here I sit, 47 years old, sober for three years almost, and it’s like everything that they said has now kicked in.”

Brent spoke about initial attempts of gaining sobriety and what finally motivated his decision to get clean.

“I got scared…and…realized I would lose my mind or get killed…and I have to protect my mind. I got through it, got cleaned up. And just stayed stopped.”

Brent continued, sharing how resources and support from a sponsor have facilitated his recovery process and have helped him to be focused about his life and remain out of prison.

“I found out that I really wasn’t thorough about the 12 steps going through Alcoholics Anonymous. And I thought I did…I guess I hadn’t. I hadn’t done a serious inventory of myself. So I finally got a sponsor…trusted in this sponsor…divulged…whatever I had that I felt like I had been running from…those deep dark secrets. So after I’d done that…like my life was like an open book…life showed up. Life. I had to live life.”

Karl shared about how he came out of the downward spiral his life was in, saying,

“I learned this in 12-step, you’ve got to surrender to win. When I think about what surrender means…they don’t fight no more…they take whatever you’re going to do to them, they trust in whatever you going to do. I surrendered to the [positive] lifestyle…and that’s really because I…had some people around me that when I surrendered, I began to look somewhere else…to change…people, places, and things.”
As for where he is now in his recovery, what aided this process, and how this overall experience has contributed to his journey of desistance Karl commented,

“February 14th…Valentine’s Day…it’s significant to me because that’s my clean date, 1995. That morning…I didn’t have anything…was sick. But what I realized moving forward…that I wasn’t sick; that was the beginning of me getting better. That next morning was the day that I did not use…and that’s huge because before then…from 1970 to 1995, I never *not* used.”

Kelvin talked about where he is now and his current recovery status.

“After the 10-year sentence in ’86 I got out…had plans every time…to stay clean. I would do well in prison. Came home back to this addiction…as soon as I used or resorted to any form of using to deal…with this confusion, boom! But in ’89 I just said, ‘Man, I don’t want to live like this no more.’ And I went into a detox…I had already been in at least 17 times. Now I’ve been clean since ’89…free of coke, heroine, weed, marijuana, any kind of drug.”

When asked about how he was able to get sober, Roger talked about how a significant relationship was instrumental to his recovery.

“I resigned [from the fire department] in 1990 because I made up my mind I was…gonna get sober. Mr. Cole…a recovering alcoholic and addict…someone…from my past…[who] went through addiction, heroin, prison…came back and reached out.”

**Integration and growth through adversity.** Participants were each asked, “What motivates you to stay out of prison?” This question generated extensive responses from participants, often including a context of past actions, filled with words of reflection and insight, in which to better understand their present and the dynamics they are still working through. This provided the interviewer with a contrast of a ‘before and after’ – how each participant viewed himself as different, and therefore able to desist from crime, despite ongoing internal and external influences.

Conrad talked about his success of desisting as a shift in how he applies his “skills”, and his maturity level.
“The same energy, effort, insight that I put into doing the wrongs that I've committed in society…I'd like to put that on this side and…transfer that mental ability…to this better way of living. Obviously you had to deal with negative situations that arise in the community. So it's a maturity factor and a fear factor sort of meshed. I've matured enough to understand the value of my life and that it would be better served on the freedom side of the prison wall. Fear of returning to prison and staying in prison, having given the system 13 plus years, I don’t want to waste anymore of my lifetime. I value my life more now than I did before.”

Conrad shared how he stays focused and motivated.

“When I got out I was invested with a sense of purpose…directly related to the relationships I made with people who were still in prison. And I promised them that I'd get out and do well enough so that I could stay out and be of service to them inside.”

In an ongoing effort to reconcile with his family, particularly his children and now grandchildren, Vincent shared from a place of past regret and being intentional in his daily decision making remarking,

“I get caught up sometimes and sad? Why couldn’t I be there for my own children? To make a positive change…it was more of an intellectual decision than anything else. So what motivates me to stay out…reestablishing relationship with my children and my grandchildren. I already put my children through that horror. I don’t want to put my grandchildren through that horror.”

Marcus talked about his “desires to use” and how reflecting on his experiences of incarceration, help him to resist these cravings.

“What I do is…keep up front the last time I went to jail. There was three people in a room. And you've got to share a toilet…share a sink. It's not like you could leave the room. You’re all confined in one little room. So…I just keep all that up front. I said, ‘I can't live like this.’ So I just keep all of that stuff up front and just say it can't be me. I'm too old for that shit…too old for that.”

Alvin spoke about what he’d lost as a result of having been incarcerated, but now working to earn it all back.

“I look at people…there was a lot of times where I said to myself, ‘Oh, I
would never take this job. ‘I’ll never do this.’ But coming out of jail, when you don’t have any money…it’s a humbling experience…really…humbling experience. And I really sat down and I thought about it. I was like, oh, my God…I’m some old guy. What keeps me motivated now is just…living life. You know, just paying my dues, earning a decent living. Still trying to build back what I had…and…don’t let it deflate you…just keep pressing forward.”

For Stephen, it was reflecting on his frequent incarcerations and the impact to his family that keeps him from returning to prison.

“I remember when I left in ’96 I said this is it…the last time you’ll [prison] see me. I didn’t want to go back. One of the things that…strikes me after a period of time is, if I’m so grown and I know so much, then how did I get back in this situation again? And I remember my mother, it was during Christmas, my kids’ mother couldn’t get in… and my parents came and seen me and we were behind the glass. And…that woke me up.”

For Karl, it has been an ongoing process of deep thought, self-understanding and awareness, and coming to a place of self-acceptance, stating passionately,

“Here’s my theory that I was able to develop over some years. I call it the 10 percent theory. Ten percent of my problem was actually alcohol and other drugs. That’s what kept me being incarcerated. The other 90% of it was my ideas…attitude…behaviors and…beliefs. I was locked into this idea that life is going to be this way and…I was going to die that way. New environment, new surroundings, having some esteem, going through a process of…understanding some things and learning something new, it gave me a chance to…step back from that lifestyle. Being formerly incarcerated, I had a lot of times I could have gone back…but some [positive] opportunities were being presented, and I took hold of them.”

As Brent shared, he presented in a manner that appeared as matter of fact, with no other option, in being committed to not returning to prison.

“After a couple scrapes with death…I seen it was not a game anymore. What scared me the most…losing my mind, being mentally messed up…and not able to get back. I really got serious about what am I going to do with my life…got to seriously thinking about that. And that was tough. [Now] it’s like another life…like where I used to be, it’s kind of hard to envision that. But it wouldn’t take much for me to go back to it…so I don’t get really cocky about it.”

Adrian also talked about how being away – incarcerated – allowed him to see the
reality of where he was living and what he had been exposed to, and observe family and community environments in a way he had not been aware of while growing up.

“[O]ne of the things that was interesting to me in returning back…after ten years, I realized that even though there were houses in my community…the area was like…living in the projects…based on the dynamics, the attitude. I never saw that when I was living there. But when I got out and got a chance to be away from it and really looked at…I was like, ‘Wow’.”

Kelvin reflected on his incarceration experiences as preparation for what he does now; working with those who are incarcerated.

“I’m figuring it out now…I don’t want to live like that no more and I have given up the criminal behavior. I have given up the criminal process although there will be some moments in my life…but it’ll never be all I have. That was a reason I knew I didn’t want to go back…because…it would hurt [my mother] immensely and on top of that I thought it was clear for me that I had a plan now. Now I use all my experiences being in prison, homeless, drugs and everything and how I found value in those valleys. So it’s not a valley you stay in. It’s a valley that can be…a gateway out of a confusing life. My priorities are clear today. And criminal behavior…is not an option.”

Although described as a lifelong traumatic experience, Roger readily admitted how influential his brother’s incarceration has been as a motivation to him to avoid re-incarceration.

“My brother, major deterrent. Probably, the biggest. I made up my mind I was number one…reclaim the person that I knew I was. What has kept me from going back…is my experience and relationship with my brother, my children, knowing what I know now, being able to label the various stressors that come with starting all over again…and being committed to just living a life that is worth living.”

For Byron, having just reached the five-year benchmark since getting out of prison, he is clear on staying goal-oriented.

“I have future plans…goals that I have…that I am more serious about. I think it’s about…good things that keep me grounded in that way…coming up with children. They are definitely a motivation for me, and then the family…motivates me. I don’t want to see them…be susceptible…like when I was young. I am at a point of maturity now; like it took all of those things
that I went through in my life…to bring me to where I am now. I haven’t been there…haven’t returned to any type of criminal ways.”

**Giving back: living life with purpose.** Based on the stories shared, participants’ experiences of not returning to prison are being equated with now living life with meaning, purpose and a plan. Reflecting on their growth through adversity and ability to desist from crime, participants gave a purposeful meaning to their lived experiences of incarceration. This comes through in participants’ stories of ways they are of service to others and invested in giving back to those going through similar life experiences. Across all the narratives, the participants talked about this as an opportunity to bring value and worth to their communities, particularly those at risk of or involved with the criminal justice system, through the sharing of knowledge gleaned from their own incarceration history and subsequent processes leading to criminal desistance.

Conrad shared proudly about accomplishments to benefit the offender population.

“I’ve succeeded…in keeping my own life on an even keel and this has allowed me to do certain things, such as the Ex-Offenders Coming Home Resource Manual, participate in surveys like this, speak in front of professionals in regards to the ex-offenders’ arena. So it’s a connection to those who remained.”

Vincent spoke about how being active in his community provides a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

“I know that…I need to do…something that I’m passionate about, that excites me…and what really does it for me is…political involvement, community activism. I desperately want to be a positive impact on my community, you know? I want to work with youngsters before they get involved in the system…and…I don’t have the formula for success, but I can tell you how not to fail.”

Alvin talked about giving in whatever ways he can and to whomever is in need.

“Seeing…homeless people on the streets…ever since I’ve gotten out of jail,
I’ve never turned anyone down…giving them what I have…any spare change or whatever it is. Because…it could’ve been me.”

Having had the positive experience of a sponsor in his life who was instrumental to his recovery and staying out of prison, Stephen now serves as a sponsor and support to others in the journey towards sobriety.

“The thing I always stress is…there’s hope. Hope is key. And you plant your seeds in all those individuals who you’re responsible for.”

Karl spoke about how his Christian values encourage him to support those going through experiences similar to his own.

“As a Christian…I absolutely target that population of people who are really struggling, who are having a hard time…I want to help people. Maybe I could be a voice for people…because I know what it could have been like.”

Although currently unemployed, Brent spoke about choosing to work in a capacity (substance abuse counselor) supporting those who are experiencing struggles similar to those he’s overcome.

“I’m trying to share my experience. I didn’t have to make it. I did…and I’m still here. And it’s for a reason. I know it’s to help people. Just help people. Eventually, I went to a school for substance abuse. You can help people just through your walk…share your experience, say, ‘I was here.’”

Adrian talked about how having earned a Master’s degree since getting out of prison, has been directly related to what he sees as his purpose in making a difference in the lives of at risk individuals.

“I’m a director of criminal justice initiatives…fulfilling I believe…my journey and my path, to try to make a difference for this population that God has rescued me from, but I’m still a part of. And I believe my lifelong journey is to do work with this population in some capacity. I think that my real responsibility…purpose…is to directly speak life into men who are struggling with finding themselves, and giving them the tools that they need to walk out of the darkness that they reside in.”
Even while incarcerated, Kelvin shared about discovering his purpose while still working through his own difficulties. Today, he works as an independent contractor with the criminal justice system.

“I feel that men and women who have been incarcerated have an enormous amount of insight and an incredible ability to affect the heart by telling their story effectively. I figured that out… and… I can help a lot of people. So here I am… in MCI Concord serving a 10-year sentence… being a volunteer. I says, ‘I’m going to do as much as I can to help people.’ I got out in 2006… and by 2010 I was standing in the largest U.S. District Court in the nation… being sworn in as a judiciary employee, community resource, job placement specialist.”

Roger talked about how since childhood, he’s had a heart to serve others.

“I realized after a number of years that… every vocation… that I had participated in was in some way… service work… music… domestic appliance repair for welfare mothers… the fire department. It was socially engaging. I was making that connection. And here I am… today as a social service provider.”

Byron talked about how given his many negative experiences with connecting with formal supports, he one day wants to create a program based on what he knows firsthand are the immediate needs of supporting those transitioning from prison. In the meanwhile, he commits to be an immediate source of encouragement to others going through similar circumstances.

“I am looking to initiate a non-profit… for persons… when they come out. If that person happens to be directly related to my everyday life… I will influence them to stop what they’re doing… to step out of all that craziness.”

At the end of the interview, participants were invited to share any final comments, and were asked, “Before we end, is there anything else you would like to share that we haven’t talked about?” Participants uniformly responded ‘no.’ Part I, the demographics portion of the interview protocol (see Appendix E) was then completed, the participant was again thanked for his participation, and the interview was ended.
Findings Summary

Overall, the stories shared by participants illuminated challenges, experiences, qualities and characteristics that notably emulate two core principles of the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2009): a) although trauma and struggle may be distressing, they may also be sources for growth and opportunity and; b) assume that it is unknown the upper limits of the capacity for an individual to grow and change; take aspirations seriously. Despite the multiple systems of internal and external influences (Greene, 2012) that emerged as risk factors, the ability to be resilient was clearly affirmed through the shared narratives of the participants and their growing stability and sustainability despite injustices experienced in their ongoing daily living. Chapter 5, the discussion chapter, gives attention to examining these internal and external characteristics that have facilitated the development of resilience among study participants, summarizing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the processes (Cresswell, 2007), while also remaining cognizant to preserve the essence of the experiences shared by participants.
Chapter V

Discussion
Introduction

The primary purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how formerly incarcerated Black men understand their desistance from crime. Data analysis procedures supported transcendental phenomenology, highlighting what participants experienced, and how they experienced it. The aim was to identify individual, interpersonal, and environmental strengths and characteristics of resilience that facilitate and encourage desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men. Exploration of resilience and characteristics that reflect an ability to rebound among the formerly incarcerated population, despite challenges and difficulty, is virtually non-existent in the current body of literature. Teti et al., (2011) underscore the vital importance of continued research centering on resilience among Black men given the social and racial contexts of their lived experiences.

Acknowledging these pertinent contexts was central to this research as its conceptual framework was structured through the lens of several paradigms: critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007; Freeman, 2011); intersectionality (Murphy et al., 2009); resilience theory (Greene, 2007; Greene et al., 2003; Richardson, 2002); and the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2009). Through this research, this framework provided the lens through which understanding and insight was gained about qualities reflecting resiliency and strengths among formerly incarcerated Black men, while also reaffirming the multiplicity of interpersonal and environmental structural disadvantages this population has encountered throughout the process of desistance.

Findings from this research study also resonated with suggestions from the literature about key dynamics in a process of desistance (Kazemian, 2007). Emphasis on internal change was viewed as important as it can be informative to developing strategies and
initiatives to meet the needs of those transitioning from the criminal justice system. Additionally, Kazemian (2007) also stressed the importance of greater knowledge and awareness of both internal and external dynamics that influence the gradual process of desistance rather than focusing solely on an abrupt end to offending. The overall discussion of the findings captures these recommendations illustratively with in-depth examples provided in the narratives (Chapter 4) of study participants.

At the onset of this research, it was very important to the researcher, a professional social worker, to recognize the dignity and worth of each study participant, regardless of past choices. The previous chapter, which outlines the findings of this study, intentionally began with a brief descriptive, or qualitative, summary about each participant and his story. A significant portion of literature available on the incarcerated population is quantitative. As a group who has been historically dehumanized and criminalized in the larger social context, it was of critical importance to the researcher to not reinforce or perpetuate a static, analytical description by reducing participants to numbers on a page and one-line verbatim excerpts from stories about their lived experiences. Rich (2009) talks about how, even as a Black man, he had to confront within himself stereotypes and biases, reinforced by negative portrayals in mainstream media (e.g. television, news outlets), held about Black males and the reality of the persons he actually encountered.

“These biases led me to believe that I knew more about the…life circumstances of these patients that I actually did. Within minutes of meeting young men…early impressions melted away. No matter how menacing young people…might have seemed from…descriptions on the…medical chart, I was reminded that they were more like me than I would ever have dared to admit. I expected along the way I would meet…a few young sociopaths whose stated purpose in life was to wound and injure others. In truth, I have met few of these, if any,” (p.196-197).
This effort on the part of the researcher to include this explanatory narrative was informed by her lived experiences. A Black woman of Caribbean (Jamaican) descent, the researcher holds a deep affection and great compassion for the Black male population. Growing up in an urban community in Boston, in a household with a dad, five brothers and many of their male friends, she was exposed to lifestyles that involved drugs, crime, and violence. She experienced and witnessed firsthand, and vicariously, interactions with individuals representing public safety (e.g. police officers) that were oppressive and discriminatory, with clear abuse of their power and authority.

Over the years, the researcher observed many Black males, family and friends alike, be ensnared in the cycle of incarceration and recidivism. In contrast, there were also those who, after being imprisoned and returning back to the community, did not go back to prison. It was this affinity for Black men and earnest curiosity, about the experiences of those who stayed out, from which this research was birthed. This motivation was also validated by the experiences of Rich (2009) who shares, “my interest in hearing from these young men [Black men impacted by violence and trauma] was sparked by the connection to them that I felt as a Black man” (p.196). Informed by her role as a daughter (dad), sister (brothers), wife to a Black man, mother of two sons, and a grandmother to a grandson, providing an alternative, positive image about formerly incarcerated Black males, in sweeping contrast to the pervasive negative social discourse about this group, was very important to the researcher.

Dedication to such efforts is also informed by literature suggesting there is better than an average chance that a Black male will at some point in his lifetime spend time in a correctional setting (Smith & Hattery, 2010). Particularly for a group whose identity is oftentimes associated with stigma (i.e. formerly incarcerated), it is the researcher’s hope that
it be shown that an individual can change and be transformed, becoming an active member of his community and the larger society, and invested in his own success while also positively contributing to the lives of others.

This chapter provides a discussion and interpretation of the study findings.

Immediate and future benefits of study findings were to:

- gain beginning knowledge about the experience of desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men;
- identify internal and external factors that promote desistance among this population, reviewing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of their experiences for the purpose of greater understanding;
- contribute to the development of practice initiatives specifically tailored to meet the needs of this population; and
- promote a positive alternative discourse about Black men who have been incarcerated.

One of the most prominent findings of this research study was the emergence of a distinctive discourse as a way to understand formerly incarcerated Black men who have desisted from crime; resilient reintegration. The frequency, and subsequent likelihood, of incarceration and recidivism is clearly evidenced in current literature (The Sentencing Project, 2010; Pew Center on the States, 2011). To the contrary, the view of formerly incarcerated Black men being resilient, and how they have been able to successfully reintegrate back to families, communities, and the larger society, is not.

In addition to the materialization of the concept resilient reintegration, several other themes emerged from this research as well. These themes were organized into the categories of risk and protective factors, both of which captured internal and external dynamics of influence. In totality, these themes assert this new social construct of resilient reintegration, revealing the following risk factors: adverse life events, addiction, environmental and
structural indignities, and unfair and unequal treatment. These factors illustrate what participants experienced, and in some instances continue to encounter, with regards to individual, interpersonal, and environmental influences. Notwithstanding, despite these negative influences, the protective factors demonstrated and affirmed how participants have been, and remain, resilient: spirituality, formal and informal supports, sobriety and recovery, integration and growth through adversity, and giving back through living life with purpose. These protective factors, characterizing participants’ resilient reintegration, reflect not only the internal change experienced by each participant, but also how they have desisted from crime, despite the many risk factors they still encounter, and remain contributing members of their families, communities, and the larger society.

An Alternative Discourse: Resilient Reintegration

The manner, in which the men told their stories denoting a sense of self-acceptance, inner peace, and gratitude for where they are now, personified their resilient reintegration. This study identified the aim to promote a positive alternative discourse about Black men who have been incarcerated. Reentry and reintegration, terms consistently used within the criminal justice literature and programs, are often used interchangeably. Reentry is defined as the process of leaving a correctional setting and returning to the larger society; reintegration is the individual’s successful reentry as demonstrated by his increased engagement with social systems inclusive of connections with family, employment, involvement with one’s community, schooling, and participation in religiously affiliated organizations (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001; James, 2014).

As a result of this research study, there is an apparent connection between how reintegration is defined in the literature and the protective factors that emerged, denoting how
this group of men has resiliently re-integrated. Collectively, they all illustrate how participants have successfully desisted and not returned to a correctional setting. Therefore, as a way to distinguish participants' new identities as transformed, contributing members of the communities to which they are connected, a shift in the dominant discourse that identifies those formerly incarcerated still by past actions (incarceration) there is a need to not only acknowledge their growth, change, and contributions, but also their current new identity of having resiliently re-integrated.

This new identity is also acknowledging of participants' process of resiliency. Richardson (2002) notes a key aspect of the resilience process is the ability of individuals to adapt “…physically, mentally, and spiritually to…circumstances…good or bad,” (p.311) and move forward through life disruptions, difficulties, opportunities, while gaining new insights and internal awareness. The nurturance of their developed resilient qualities and continual growth through life experiences is demonstrative of how this group remains resiliently re-integrated.

A resiliently re-integrated group, study participants exhibit the following characteristics: have desisted from crime for five or more years and; experienced successful re-entry following discharge as demonstrated by his involvement with formal (e.g. education, religious affiliation, agency services) and/or informal (e.g. family, friends, significant) supports; and engaged with employment and/or volunteerism (e.g. giving back). Having resiliently re-integrated also illustrates the current capabilities, strengths, and functionality of this population. This term is one that affirms the dignity and worth of the person, their desire to be acknowledged for where they are now (desisting) and what they are doing (living in purpose, helping others) rather than who they once were (formerly incarcerated). As a
member of the resiliently reintegrated population, their journey from incarceration to being a contributing member of society is now validated.

This alternative discourse of being resiliently reintegrated fulfills an expressed need in the literature. Teti et al., (2011) suggest the importance of research that provides a deeper understanding of the complex nature of Black men and the array of structural disadvantages they encounter on a daily basis. Further, despite these challenges, this population can still be successful. Having insight to how, where, whom, and from what they develop their resilience, coupled with validation of their perseverance, is critical.

The intent of this research study was to explore the phenomenon of criminal desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men, identify what promoted their efforts to stay out of prison, and overall, how they have been successful. With an evolving body of literature focused on the concept of desistance, research centered on Black men is scant (Hughes, 1998; Teti et al., 2011). Research also highlights the growing trend to define desistance as a qualitative experience, a gradual, developmental process, with a shift away from measuring desistance quantitatively, as a discreet, sudden experience of offending to non-offending (Carlsson, 2012; Kazemian, 2007). Using a transcendental phenomenological design also supported the need for qualitative research among this population. This approach centered on capturing subjective processes (Carlsson, 2012) with desistance, juxtaposed to the abundance of quantitative data currently available, providing both textural (what participants faced) and structural (how they dealt with situations) descriptions of their experiences.

Reisig et al., (2007) also note the importance of research that considers the social ecosystem to which formerly incarcerated Black men are being released. These communities
are more often than not plagued by social problems such as poverty, crime, and racism, all of which are antecedents to recidivism (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005; Reisig et al., 2007). At the time of the interview, all the study participants lived in, or in close proximity to, the city of Boston. All expressed a sense of pride and positive connection to the city. The communities of Boston (e.g. Dorchester, Mattapan, Roxbury) were described in ways that reflected participants’ familiarity and affinity, and as a place to which they still experience an ongoing connection. Participants shared about Boston as their own hometown or as the home to many family members, friends, a community that they still frequent, and a place to which they feel an obligation to make a difference. It was an aim of this study to be attuned to the interplay between the various dynamics of influence, their bearing on the multiple identities – father, brother, provider, protector – these men fulfill daily, and ways in which these interactions facilitated his desistance from crime.

The questions and probes asked of each study participant explicitly explored for the strengths of their experiences with desistance – supports, encouragement, and motivation. Nevertheless, the challenges and barriers encountered throughout their desistance processes organically and concurrently surfaced. The depth to which risks where disclosed was an unexpected outcome of this study as questions were not intentionally asked about risks. The stories shared by participants proved very informative and provided meaningful insight, reinforcing the importance of assessing both risk and resilience (Greene, 2007).

The men provided in-depth historical and present day lived accounts through which to understand their present state of desistance. Each participant’s shared his narrative with vivid detail describing how he came to be incarcerated, and since receiving his certificate of release, what he has done to ensure that he successfully remain out of prison. The stories,
rich with illustrations of their journey to date, detailed the multiple dynamics of influence which manifested through this resiliently reintegrated population’s own internalized processes conjoint with external social and structural forces all of which have been contributory to their desistance.

It is the researcher’s impression that each participant wanted her to have a clear understanding of the person he once was and the life circumstances that predicated their involvement with crime. Stories were not offered through a lens of blame but with the intention to provide a clear, contextual understanding. Rich (2009) similarly notes from his work with young Black men, “none of these young men offered their childhood adversity as an excuse,” (p.198). This was corroborated by how forthcoming the men were about their experiences. They willingly volunteered so much and, actively listening and demonstrating affirming body language (e.g. eye contact, head nods, leaning in), seemed to not only invite them to share more but also validate that their lived experiences held value and worth.

From the researcher’s perspective, there did not appear to be any shame or embarrassment to what each man shared, and in an unpretentious demeanor, each were expressive about taking responsibility for past actions and the impact his behavior had on the lives of others. There was also a tone of gratitude towards one’s self, appreciatively acknowledging what he had been able to overcome, even gain, from his time of incarceration. Participants readily shared how this life experience has been directly correlated to their ability to understand and be sensitive to those going through similar life events, and has given them a profound capacity to now give back particularly to this population in whatever ways they can. It seemed participants wanted the researcher to be
well informed of how they have made meaning – and peace – with their life experiences and now were transformed individuals – spirit, mind, and body.

**Risk Factors and Desistance: What Participants Experienced**

Recognizing that risk factors can be both internal and external (Greene, 2007), participants of this study shared being predisposed to an array of psychosocial and environmental factors that made them susceptible to recidivating: adverse life events; addiction; environmental and structural indignities; and unfair and unequal treatment.

**Adverse life events.** Participants shared about early life experiences overwhelmed by trauma, which they felt led to their involvement with crime and eventual imprisonment. It was observed by the researcher that as the men spoke there was a tone reflective of an internalized peace and acceptance of these experiences, situations they knew they had no control over yet had devastating effects on their early developmental and adult years. Rich (2009) notes from his interviews how “it is impossible to hear these young men tell their stories and not hear the deeper scars of trauma in their lives,” (p.198).

Nonetheless, trauma was not used as a scapegoat for their previous decisions and actions. Results of this study indicate that for the participants it seemed that their time of incarceration served as a period for self-reflection, whether or not they were ready for it. Incarceration served as the opportunity, willingly and unwillingly, to have to stop and take stock of life’s hardships and acknowledge that although circumstances seemed unfair (e.g. death of parent, no relationship with father, rejection, family discord), they were responsible for their actions in the here and now. They had to make the decision to stop behaviors leading to prison and decision to live and be different. This ultimately led to a new sense of personal awareness and internal locus of control, facilitating self-acceptance.
It is the researcher’s opinion that incarceration served as a paradox; that these periods of being locked up, detained, and restrained, have ultimately led to a life of being free – physically, spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally. The contradiction of ‘incarceration leading to freedom’ warrants further explanation. In order for these men to begin to change their life course from imprisonment to living as a free citizen, incarceration protected them from the pervasive, structural disadvantages this population continually encounters in the larger social context. At the least, while incarcerated, participants were not faced with the constant, daily realities of unemployment, homelessness, and the social plight facing many urban communities. That said, it was the anticipation of having to at some point, as they planned for release, face these certainties of what they would encounter, that motivated them to want to change and not return to prison.

The men were honest with themselves about decisions and actions they had once made, but those actions were not representative of who they felt they could be. Participants stayed centered on who they had become. How they have stayed motivated and resilient has been by staying real, honest, and authentic with themselves about who they were, what they had done, how and what they needed to do in order to change, and that ultimately, they were responsible for themselves, despite early life hardships.

Although none of the participants shared at length about their experiences while incarcerated, given the extended sentences that many of them served (see Table 1), the researcher speculated about what these years imprisoned were like. Some talked about going from institution to institution, in and out for short and long time periods. Given their history of trauma-related life events, there was a curiosity about how the experience of incarceration may have been viewed. Haney (2006) writes about the psychological impact of the US
correctional system noting the neglect of rehabilitating prisoners and an increased focus on punitive and stigmatizing practices. At a 2002 National Policy Conference on reentry, Haney outlines how the experience of incarceration requires several psychological adjustments: “dependence on institutional structures…alienation…social withdrawal and isolation…exploitative norms of prison culture…diminished sense of self-worth and personal value,” and the influence these dynamics have on the process of reentry (Haney, 2001, pp.4-7).

A formerly incarcerated Black male, DeVeaux (2013) details his time of incarceration, sharing what he witnessed and experienced, and the long lasting impact to his psyche. A doctoral student at the time his article was published, DeVeaux (2013) recounts the thirty two years spent in the New York State prison system, twenty-five incarcerated in maximum security settings and the last seven on parole. “The experience of being locked in a cage has a psychological effect upon everyone made to endure it. No one leaves unscarred. This psychological suffering is compounded by the knowledge of violence, witnessing violence, or the experience of violence, all too common during incarceration,” (DeVeaux, 2013, p.257-259). DeVeaux (2013) reviews research that implies the design of incarceration is intentionally structured to be oppressive and traumatic noting, “…threats to the life goals of the individual, to his defensive system, to his self-esteem, or to his feelings of security. These forms of punishment result from deprivations caused by loss of liberty, material impoverishment, personal inadequacy…loss of autonomy…loss of personal security…suggests the emotional and psychological forms of punishment of prison life today might be viewed as punishments which the free community deliberately inflicts on the offender for violating the law,” (p.260).

Noting that the experience of trauma can vary, DeVeaux (2013) highlights how trauma is conceptualized is dependent on the person, the event, and his reaction to it. As a Black man
who served a significant time in prison, DeVeaux (2013) notes the importance of studies about trauma that specifically focus on the experiences of Black males. “Researchers have often made assumptions about the nature of the event and largely ignored the subjective component or unique perspective of the individual experiencing it,” (DeVeaux, 2013, p.262). Acknowledging the complex nature of the Black male identity, more specifically those who are formerly incarcerated, and this identity influenced by individual and social factors, it is an area of inquiry that DeVeaux (2013) views as under-examined and of concern, recognizing the disproportionate rates at which Black men are incarcerated. “The condition of people returning to communities [from correctional settings] should be of great public concern because the environment in which people are confined affects the psychological condition in which they return,” (DeVeaux, 2013, p.264).

Incarceration as a traumatic experience, with intentional forces manifesting an experience that is oppression and punitive, is not only disturbing, but clearly socially unjust. Particularly through the lens of critical race theory and intersectionality, the notion that Blacks are viewed as more dangerous than whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007) and the Black male image being strongly associated with poverty, violence, and crime in mainstream society (Alexander, 2010), is a viewpoint that warrant further examination. It is important to more closely examine ways in which the process of recovering from the trauma of incarceration “…negotiating life transitions…” (Greene, 2007, p.45) was experienced, and despite these occurrences, these men have resiliently reintegrated.

**Addiction.** The role that drug and alcohol abuse played in the lives of participants seems apparent given early life events resonant of loss and trauma. Substance use and abuse became the manner through which participants attempted to cope with both internal
instability and external oppressive dynamics. Growing up in a home and/or community where drug use seemed commonplace, the notion of getting high and/or overindulging in alcohol was the standard for how one grappled with difficult, painful, and/or stressful circumstances. Addiction also seemed fueled not only by environmental dynamics (i.e. street life, prevalence of drugs, peer pressure, crime, violence) but also social injustices (i.e. racism, discrimination, assassination of civil rights activists/role models).

What was most dominant in participants’ narratives was the feeling of being marginalized and invisible (Murphy et al., 2009) in initial efforts to end their addiction. In addition to living in urban environments exposed to crime, violence, and illicit drugs, these men experienced a host of social inequalities, perpetuating experiences of racism and discrimination. For example, Kelvin spoke at length as to what it felt like for him to lose three individuals who represented justice and freedom to him: Dr. Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, and Robert F. Kennedy. Conrad and Vincent talked about the conditions of their neighborhood, comparing it to suburban communities and the threat of danger that lingered in the urban setting. Roger talked about the daily onslaught of racism and discrimination he experienced in the workplace. As noted by Kelvin, getting high was the “escape…I didn’t have to feel anymore.” This sentiment seemed to ring true for the participants who struggled with addiction.

These collective experiences resonate with key concepts of critical race theory reflecting, “racism is firmly entrenched within the structures and organizations of American culture,” (Freeman, 2011, p.184) and the notion of invisibility (Freeman, 2011). Furthermore, Delgado & Stefancic (2007) state how Black men are, more likely than not, viewed as more dangerous that their white counterparts in today’s society. This asserts race as a social
construct, alongside concepts of intersectionality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007; Murphy, et al., 2009) such as inequality, marginalization based on one’s place in society, and homogenization (which, in turn, upholds invisibility).

Environmental and structural indignities. Participants seemed somewhat suspicious of the researcher’s attention to and intentions with this population. Their collective impressions were that for individuals who have gone to prison, served their time, and have now returned to society, despite these efforts, they are still seen in a derogatory and stereotypical manner. Labels such as ‘ex-con’, ‘felon’, ‘ex-offender’, even the term used throughout this study ‘formerly incarcerated’, emphasizes their previous actions rather than their current state. Alexander (2010) summarizes this experience fittingly stating, “once a person is labeled a felon, he…is ushered into a parallel universe in which discrimination, stigma, and exclusion are perfectly legal and privileges of citizenship…are off-limits. It is the badge of inferiority,” (p.94). The men talked about how current systems, policies, and structures are not set up in a way to promote success among this population, but established in such a manner to maintain a status quo for perpetual incarceration. “Prisons are big business and have become deeply entrenched in America’s economic and political system. Rich and powerful people…have invested millions in private prisons…[and] are deeply interested in expanding the market – increasing the supply of prisoners…people who can be held captive for a profit,” (Alexander, 2010, p.230). With the increase in the prison industrial complex, the growing industry of prison privatization, it would appear there are elements of truths in participants’ skepticism.

The men also presented as well informed and knowledgeable about the enslavement of Black men in the United States, and the ensuing ramifications of this history: racialization
of crime; oppression and discrimination; systemic injustices (i.e. mandatory minimum sentencing practices, CORI, stop and frisk policies); and ongoing social stereotypes often depicting Black men as criminals, drug dealers, unemployed, uneducated, and absentee fathers. These pervasive negative images seem to propagate a sense of inferiority among this population. Aresti et al., (2010) describes this as “conflicting selves…the status of ex-offender…has negative implications…yet it is…important for maintaining a positive sense of self and prosocial behavior,” (p.186). Aresti et al., (2011) further talks about how this constant assessing of social situations, where it may not be beneficial to share one’s former status as an ex-offender, in contrast to settings where this disclosure may be validated, respected, even appreciated, is an important component of this group’s daily lives.

It is speculated by the researcher that with a shift in the discourse from formerly incarcerated to resiliently reintegrated, that this more accurate social perception could assist with facilitating some internal compromise for this population, lessening some of the intra-conflict around one’s identity. The presumption being that with external acknowledgement from the larger society of their present identity (resiliently reintegrated) and not continued focus on their past actions (formerly incarcerated) this would be validating and reaffirming to their own self perception, one of being a positive, transformed member of society.

Participants talked about wanting to be engaged and treated with respect and dignity, not less than or worthless. All were expressive about the poor choices made earlier in their lives and acknowledged these decisions with remorse and regret. Nonetheless, they also staunchly declared who they are now, not in ignorance or denial of their previous actions, but despite their experiences and now living with purpose and conviction to make a difference in the lives of others. The desire now is to be treated as such, a contributing member of society.
This sentiment was apparent in the pre-screen interview with Phil, an interested inquirer who was deemed ineligible for participation in the study because he is on lifetime parole. Noting the ineligibility as “…yet another rejection…” there was a moment of seeming defeated and devalued because he could not take part and contribute his voice to this work. This experience of being rejected because of his former status, although it does not reflect who he is now, reiterates the experience of conflicting identities and navigating this internal process almost daily. It also required of the researcher to think about how potentially re-traumatizing such encounters can be. Overcoming negative early life experiences, surviving incarceration, successfully reentering and fully reintegrating in society, desisting from crime; that even with all these accomplishments, there are some who may never be allowed (e.g. lifetime parole) to move beyond the identity of being formerly incarcerated.

The results of this study affirm the idea of “racism as ordinary” and how this construct functions within American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2007, p.136). Moreover, the construct of colorblindness (Alexander, 2010; Freeman, 2011), looking beyond race in the assessment of social injustice and inequities, sounds good in theory but does not translate into justifiable, validating actions. “It is perfectly legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once labeled felons the old forms of discrimination [Jim Crow] are…legal. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have…redesigned it,” (Alexander, 2010, p.2). It is this pervasive nature of systemic injustices that maintains the experience of ‘being invisible’ as shared by the participants.

Observed by the researcher as a very real concern, social inequality remains prominent among the participants, even though they have all resiliently reintegrated. Despite the accomplishment of desisting and not returning to prison, access to resources is still
inequitable, given their social identity of being Black, male, and formerly incarcerated. Dependent on life situations that can arise at any time, a participant may need to reach out for assistance with finding employment, accessing higher education, or simply, fulfilling basic human needs. For any of them, depending on who or what they are seeking for support, it may require disclosure of felony status. For at least one participant, he was fortunate to get his record sealed. However, no other participant disclosed a similar benefit. Having to share about one’s forensic status could be held against him, even in light of having an established history of staying out of prison and being resiliently reintegrated.

A very tangible reality for these men is also their daily encounters with micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010). Perpetuated through the ongoing characterization of the Black male image in mainstream media, regularly associated with terms such as ‘convict’, ‘ex-con’, or ‘ex-offender’, those who have a former history of incarceration are still very much negatively portrayed in all forms of media. To have been an ‘inmate’ or now ‘ex-prisoner’ is often implied to mean that the individual is dangerous, looking for a next victim or crime to commit; and when released from prison, he is a deemed a danger and menace to society, and it is essentially a matter of time before he offends and is re-incarcerated. It is the onslaught of these multiple layers of indignities that manifest in everyday comments or actions about race, gender, and/or forensic status that perpetuate the valid desire among participants to be treated with dignity and respect.

**Unfair and unequal treatment.** The perspectives shared by participants about how professional helpers can support formerly incarcerated Black men provide new and important knowledge to contribute to the current body of literature, with specific focus to the construct of a population who have resiliently reintegrated. Asking a disenfranchised and largely
marginalized population about what they believe is needed, in order for a population at high risk for re-offending, would appear to be an obvious perspective to explore. However, it must be acknowledged the systematic and structural disadvantages that continually disempower those who are formerly incarcerated and the inherent dynamics of power and privilege that still prevail in terms of who has power and who does not, whose voice is heard, or not, and who ultimately has influence, and who does not.

Captured through this theme, participants shared about wanting to be treated with basic human dignity through: understanding; being recognized; not being judged; not making assumptions; providing hope; being authentic; seeing the inherent disadvantages of the current systems and structures that become barriers to being successful. These qualities are also supportive to and acknowledging of their resiliently reintegrated status. It was of paramount interest to participants to be treated with sensitivity and understanding about their developmental process that led to desistance: their experiences of being incarcerated; awareness and compassion from formal and informal support systems about the ensuing processes and the related stress of reentry and reintegration; ways in which they have been able to steadily change behaviors; cognitive restructuring that has helped them to desist from crime; and receiving hope and a genuine sense of care and concern from those who provide support.

It seemed that more often than not, interactions with professional helpers were not respectful of their complex identity and needs as Black men engaged in the gradual process of change. Participants shared in summary, “They need to listen…be patient…tolerant…believe in me…give people a chance…not be judgmental…know a little bit more about what [we’re] capable of doing…stress there’s hope.” The men felt not only
stigmatized by the label of ‘ex-offender’, being formerly incarcerated, but also a disrespected and diminished sense of worth as a Black male in American society, with little expectation of them to change, grow, and ultimately be successful at staying out of prison.

Alexander (2010) talks about the idea of “ignoring race in advocacy” and how, ultimately this approach is ineffective. “Race must be talked about openly and honestly…[and]…come to understand the racial history and origins of mass incarceration. We must admit, out loud, that it was because of race [emphasis preserved] that we didn’t care much what happened to ‘those people’ and imagined the worst possible things about them,” (p.238). From the researcher’s perspective, formerly incarcerated Black men are the epitome of ‘those people’. Clearly described throughout this research, Black men are a high-risk population, described as ‘endangered’ (Shaw, 2012), for a whole host of reasons. To be portrayed in such a way is also alluding to the possibility of their role within society becoming extinct, at least within the context of the larger social environment. Outside of professional sports and the music industry, Black men have little to no influence or presence. More complex, for those who have served time in a correctional setting, they are becoming increasingly disenfranchised (e.g. felony disenfranchisement laws). This is a disturbing thought, yet not entirely inconceivable. The rate at which Black men, and young Black boys alike, are being incarcerated this is a very probable reality.

It is also the researcher’s opinion that even among advocates and practitioners, legislators, and what few allies there may be for the formerly incarcerated population, the idea of talking about race openly and directly is still quite proscribed. It makes the pervasive nature in which race is entangled in the history of the United States, its clear association to
mass incarceration and the growing prison industrial complex, an all too real and valid issue to address.

As a Black woman, some of what the men shared with regards to being treated unfairly and with disdain, reverberated with the researcher and her own experiences of oppression and discrimination. Critical race theory (Freeman, 2011) recognizes the reality that for those who stand to gain the most, especially financially through the privatization of prisons, there is no comparable benefit that motivates a desire or need for structural change. As a social worker and advocate for social justice, one of the most difficult components of this work is acknowledging the reality that in order for there to be equity, those who hold power must be willing to relinquish, sacrifice, the privilege they have. This willingness must be intentional and extended with a genuine commitment to wanting not only short-term individual level change, but more importantly, larger systemic restructuring where there is equity in the distribution of goods and services, in addition to equal access and quality of resources for all, particularly for those who are marginalized and disenfranchised.

**Summary of Risk Factors and Experiences**

Overall, the risk factors that emerged in the findings of this research study are consistent with those highlighted in the current body of knowledge (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005; Pew Center on the States, 2011; Reisig, et al., 2007). For example, Teti et al., (2011) explored resilience among 30 urban Black men, of which 33% (n=10) had a history of imprisonment. Findings from this study referenced the following challenges: racial micro-aggressions, unemployment, and stress of the streets, all of which are correlate with environmental and structural indignities.
An unexpected area of new knowledge gained as a result of this study was that of learning about the men’s perspectives on professional helpers. In addition to learning about experiences with formal supports that were both positive and negative, it was equally enlightening to hear suggestions from this population about ways to improve the professional helping relationship. Rich (2009) highlights the men he interviewed who have been successful in overcoming much adversity, “still must struggle daily, not only with the injuries of his past but also with the expectation that he is solely responsible for healing himself,” (p.198). Rich (2009) implores providers to extend compassion and not condemnation noting, “as providers, our job is not…to fix the cycle. [S]ome of those decisions, while incomprehensible to us, make abundant sense on the streets. Our job is not so much to judge their actions as good or bad, sensible or senseless, as to…understand how and why they arrive in these perilous places,” (p.199). Particularly with respect to the social work profession, a discipline not only committed to social justice but also that champions interactions that are warm, genuine, and authentic, it would seem that social workers should be leading the charge in practice initiatives focused on meeting the needed of this population.

It was noticeable to the researcher that study participants did not make any distinction about the preference of race, gender, or class of those from whom they have accessed services or support. Given what the men had shared about how they were treated and the judgments made about them as formerly incarcerated Black men, the researcher anticipated that participants might be explicit about a preference to work with professionals with whom they might more identify: person of color, ideally Black; male; someone who may have served time in a correctional setting; someone whose lived experiences paralleled their own. But as the men responded to this question about what helpers should know, their answers
undeniably identified the most important quality they sought: to be a compassionate, thoughtful, sincere human being, who is genuine and and sincere in efforts to assist this population with their needs, starting first by seeing them as a person, not a label, and treating them accordingly. Being treated in this way also would facilitate the gradual process towards desisting among formerly incarcerated Black men and ultimately their experience of resilient reintegration.

**Protective Factors and Desistance: How Participants Succeeded**

An anticipated goal of this research study was to identify characteristics indicative of participants’ resilience and strengths and how they facilitated their desistance from crime. Despite the multiple internal and external risk factors experienced by study participants, the eleven men interviewed for this study all have successfully desisted from crime for five or more years. This accomplishment well exceeds the recidivism benchmark of three years (NIJ, 2010; The Sentencing Project, 2010). Despite adverse early life trauma, chemical dependency, systemic injustices, and experiences of being treated as less than, this specific group of men have been able to stay out of prison and desist from crime. This, in turn, reflects their current identity as a resiliently reintegrated group. Similarly to risk factors, participants shared internal and external factors that were contributory to their ability to desist and the resilience developed throughout their process of reintegration. These factors surfaced as the following themes: spirituality; formal and informal supports; sobriety and recovery; integration and growth through adversity; and giving back through living life with purpose.

**Spirituality.** Defined within this study as having a connection to or relationship with a higher power or God, spirituality in the lives of individuals transitioning from a
correctional setting is a familiar component and oftentimes associated with their initial decision and beginning efforts to not return to prison. What has been unique about this group of men, however, is the longevity and ongoing nature of this spiritual connectedness. For these men, the relationship they have with God or a higher power remains significant not only to their criminal desistance, but also how this spiritual connection is one that they commit to maintain as part of their overall well-being.

The initial commitment that the participants made to a force outside of themselves while still incarcerated, seemed experienced as a reprieve. It was an opportunity to get out, get their life in order, and make positive contributions in the lives of those to whom they are connected, including themselves, and the community in which they live. The stories shared depicted moments of deep humility, gratitude, and self-examination (i.e. answered prayer, feeling blessed, brokenness, getting on knees, something done for them, a life journey). These narratives tell of a journey through introspection, personal judgment and accountability, and self-forgiveness – all towards their self-acceptance. Where there had been a tone of mediocrity, a new sentiment appeared - grace.

Within many religious faiths, grace is defined as God’s love and mercy for humankind, freely given to us by God solely because God desires us to have it, not because of anything we have done, or could do, to earn it. The gratefulness expressed by the men about God or a higher power embodied grace. Even while incarcerated, most had made up their mind this would be their last time in a correctional setting, having faith and believing that God had heard their prayer and something new and different was going to happen. This beginning sense of worth, that they had received grace, seemed to instigate the internal shift of once seeing life as meaningless to one now filled with potential and possibility.
This new internalized perspective appeared demonstrative of the early beginnings of self-love. Interestingly, this is characteristic of biblical scripture that says, “Three things will last forever – faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13 NLT). The faith administered by participants to believe in a power higher, greater, and outside of themselves, have hope and anticipate that something new, different, and positive was going to happen in their lives, and a developing and deepening self-acceptance and self-love, in partnership with the love and support of others, all ostensibly remain a vital component in the participants’ ability to maintain their resilient reintegration. These experiences also assert two primary claims about innate resilience: a connection to an internal force or energy; and, resilience is a capacity in every person’s soul (Richardson, 2002).

Spirituality in the lives of African Americans is well researched. Additionally, religious institutions (e.g. churches, mosques, house of worship) are viewed as essential support networks in most Black communities. Exploring the relationship between spirituality, resilience, and Blacks, Jones et al., (2012) note how participation in the black church “often provides a degree of stability, affective experience, and group cohesiveness through which…coping strategies, based on…shared histories, could emerge,” (p.43). As evidenced by the narratives of study participants, their spiritual connection assisted with creating a sense of internal stability, developing healthy ways of coping (supporting their efforts at sobriety and recovery), facilitating self-love, all towards the ability to successfully desisting from crime.

**Formal and informal supports.** With a nascent positive sense of self and self-worth, and hope for a changed future life of staying out of prison, the men seemed very
intentional to be in relationships with those who could see this potential in them. These interactions were with formal services like counseling, mental health services, agency support; as well as family and friends. The narratives highlighted these relationships as being non-judgmental, authentic, supportive, genuine, and caring. As several participants similarly summarized, “…having good people…” has been helpful to their process of desistance and continuing to resiliently reintegrate. These relationships promoted within the participants a desire to no longer run from past trauma, loss, actions, and experiences; but to confront, acknowledge, and move beyond these challenges and embrace post-incarceration opportunities with hope and optimism. Some participants talked about being connected with “good people [family, friends, sponsor]…brothers in the community who were doing well…friends who had been clean for a while.”

These social connections were instrumental to their developmental process of desisting. Harris (2011) talks about the challenge for those desisting from crime in not having role models. “This way of [criminal] life is familiar…and change…extremely difficult…without conventional role models,” (p.71). Desisting from crime requires having a social network of individuals who are themselves desisting, and being around peers who where committed to changing their lives (Harris, 2011). For study participants, having benefits from having these ‘good people’, they now serve as a ‘role model’, someone who has changed, is desisting from crime, to those who are new to the process. This is visited more in depth in the theme of giving back.

**Sobriety and recovery.** Embracing a new lifestyle and life view through the lens of hope and opportunity seemed to also fuel participants’ commitment to staying clean and sober. Many also talked about these efforts of maintaining sobriety and recovery as ongoing
to their resilient reintegration. Participants acknowledged they had reached a place in their lives, that if they truly wanted to change their lifestyle, they could no longer deny, repress, or circumvent the triggers to their substance use. Participants braved past trauma, mental health issues, and abandonment, owning their precarious approaches to coping and the need to be completely honest and transparent with themselves. This self-confrontation is also an example of efforts to continually resilient and not resort to “dysfunctional reintegration…when people resort to substances, destructive behaviors, or other means to deal…” (Richardson, 2002, p.312). This deep personal sincerity seemed to promote and facilitate the continuing transformative process, both internally (self-acceptance and self-love) and externally (behaviors and actions).

Integration and growth through adversity. Participants consistently shared that, if nothing else, prison provided a space for personal contemplation. This theme amplified participants’ reflection of past actions and present status and how this recurrent process of self-reflection motivates them to preserve their transformed identity as a resiliently reintegrated Black man. These experiences were laden with insight from retrospection, providing contrasts of a life once lived to who they are now. Men gave detailed description of challenges overcame and spoke with an assured, unpretentious confidence to the person they are today, despite past (i.e. adverse life events, addiction) and present (i.e. environmental and structural indignities, unfair and unequal treatment) difficulties.

Motivation was described as personal growth and maturity, continuing to make positive choices and changes, keeping up front the experiences of being incarcerated, and staying mindful of having been spared to do different and make a difference. One participant shared, “The same energy…I put into doing…wrongs…I put on this side…to this better way
of living.” There was a clear sense of self-acceptance as to their present identity as someone who made past mistakes and is now willing, actually desiring, to give back to others, “I promised them [fellow inmates] that I’d get out and do well enough so that I could stay out and be of service to them inside.”

This impetus at the onset of their journey towards desistance is emblematic of major tenets of the strengths perspective: liberation and empowerment; and alienation and oppression (Saleebey, 2009). Even in the midst of ongoing environmental and structural inequities, participants could still envision possibility, “new ways of being and doing,” (Saleebey, 2009, p.7). Their efforts to make choices that reflected their commitment to be, think, and do different each day, despite micro-aggressions, racism, or discrimination they encounter, they made choices to rise above and embrace their own potential and abilities to become resilient and desist from crime. This ability was evidenced by how participants now utilized energies, abilities, and talents that previously caused harm to self and others, in a productive self-advancing manner. As noted by Conrad, “the same energy, effort insight that I put into doing the wrongs…I transfer to this better way of living. I value my life more now that I did before.” Participants consistently demonstrated an ongoing appreciation and value for their current life circumstances of desisting from crime and experiencing a secure sense of constancy on a daily basis. This led to a collective belief that despite all of the past and current difficulties, there has been a plan entrenched in the journey - to give back and live life with purpose.

**Giving back: living life with purpose.** An unexpected finding of this research study was the extent to which participants were active in giving back to others. Participants have seemingly reframed their incarceration time as ‘preparation’ for where they are now and
living life with intentionality, focus, and a plan of helping others. This commitment to live
life with purpose is demonstrated by: serving as a sobriety sponsor; engagement in
community activism; sharing experiences with professionals working with this population;
and working as a human service provider committed to working with individuals
transitioning out of the criminal justice system. Whatever their sphere of influence, these
men shared about ways they are invested in giving back on a consistent basis. It is apparent
it has become a part of their daily lives and fulfilling this sense of purpose as to why they’ve
not only gone through their experiences but have also survived them. As one participant
said, “I’m trying to share my experience…it’s for a reason…to help people.”

Given their lived experiences, riddled with early life challenges, continual encounters
with dynamics of oppression, yet successfully desisting from crime, the researcher holds the
belief that so much can be learned from this population. A comment made by one of the
participants, Kelvin, continues to resonate with the researcher as it aptly affirms this idea
that, “…men and women who have been incarcerated have an enormous amount of insight
and an incredible ability to affect the heart by telling their story effectively.” Society must
begin to shift the perspective of how formerly incarcerated Black men are viewed and engage
in a new discourse, one that recognizes their success as a resiliently reintegration population.
Additionally, researchers must also recognize the vast amount of knowledge and expertise
about the experience of incarceration and the developmental process that facilitates
desistance held by this population as their contributions are vital to future research focused
on desistance and resilience.

These stories not only illustrated and accentuated the strengths and resilience of these
particular men, but that many have achieved in a way they once never imagined. As
Saleebey (2009) notes, take aspirations seriously – a person’s ability to grow and change is unknown, and therefore limitless. As a society, we have to begin to acknowledge a person’s potential to change, despite an array of internal and external factors, and that anyone, even a formerly incarcerated individual, can change, resiliently reintegrate, and become a contributing member of society.

Summary of Protective Factors and Success

Literature focused on desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men is virtually non-existent. For studies that parallel this work, findings were comparable. Using an exploratory research design, Hughes (1998) interviewed 20 young, urban African American and Latino men in order to understand what motivates them to desist from crime. The protective factors that emerged from the interview data of this research resonate with the findings highlighted in Hughes’ (1998) work: change for children; support and role modeling (having others as role models); fear of incarceration; and contemplation time. More recent work of Teti et al., (2011) notes the following resilience traits: perseverance, reflecting and refocusing to address difficulties, and spirituality, all of which align with the themes that emerged in this research.

The identified protective factors: spirituality, formal and informal supports, sobriety and recovery, integration and growth through adversity, and giving back, collectively are exemplars of the core theoretical paradigm that emerged from this research, the concept of resilient reintegration. As previously highlighted, Richardson (2002) describes a key aspect of the resilience process as “biopsychospiritual homeostasis…a point in time when one has adapted physically, mentally, and spiritually to a set of circumstances whether good or bad” (p.311). Luthar and Brown (2007) also affirm this characteristic of resilience, summarizing
this stability as a “sustained positive adjustment following traumas…[and]…recovery
displayed after initial maladjustment following negative life events” (p.948). The ability of
participants to adjustment to life after prison, recognizing the inherent trauma of
incarceration, reiterates their innate resilience. As evidenced by the extended years of
desistance reported by participants, contextualized by the stories told, participants openly
disclosed both the positives and the negatives of their experiences after release, reflection and
insight of life before and after incarceration that are seen as motivating, and where they are
now in ongoing efforts to remain resiliently reintegrated in their families, community, and
society.

As was said collectively by all the men in some form or fashion, ‘that’s not me
anymore’. Participants were clear in taking responsibility for past actions in addition to
identifying larger historical and systemic influences that were experienced as discriminatory
and oppressive; and although structured to assist in the reintegration process, many systems
created disadvantage. Interestingly, most did not amplify race specifically. Participants
spoke very directly about the history of Blacks in America, and from an acquiescent place of
social reality and one’s social location, about what it means to not only be Black, but also a
Black male who was once incarcerated.

On a whole, the study participants desired to be respected as a human being. Rich
(2009) stresses the importance of practitioners having “common language for discussing
…problems that reflect a more human understanding…we should understand that they are
injured…[and] that injury requires healing and rehabilitation,” (p.199). It seemed they also
wanted to be acknowledged for how they’ve changed, haven’t returned to prison, and have
reintegrated with resilience. This is reflected in their ongoing efforts to live positively and
with purpose, and contribute to their families, communities, and the larger society, essentially providing a distinct contrast to the assumptive social expectation that they will eventually recidivate.

**Study Implications**

Although study findings are not generalizable, information gleaned gives credence to the critical need for future research. Since its inception, the profession of social work had historical tenets to the criminal and juvenile justice systems (Reamer, 2004). Over the last three decades, the profession has increasingly distanced itself from these systems and has not had an active role in influencing policies and legislations. In a 2010 Workforce Study (NASW, 2010) it is highlighted the critical need for the profession to become re-engaged with the criminal justice system, particularly as leaders in organizing service delivery to this population. Cnaan et al., (2008) underscore the critical importance for the profession to defend, support, and advocate for the needs of the formerly incarcerated population.

**Study Limitations**

Using an exploratory research design, the intent of this research was to explore the shared experiences with the phenomenon, desistance, among a small group of formerly incarcerated Black men. The intent was to capture the “universal essence” (Cresswell, 2007) among the study participants. Using a qualitative approach, phenomenology, findings of this study are not generalizable, given the small sample size. Another limitation was that the forensic status and history gained from participants were not verified and the information gathered was based on self-reports only. Lastly, it has been stated throughout this work the scarce literature available that focuses on desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men. However, what does exist emphasizes the critical need for continued research.
Social Work Education

As the problem of incarceration and recidivism continue to escalate in the United States, social workers must also demonstrate professional competence, an ethical standard, of how best to serve and support this population. At present, coursework in social work programs that are accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) are required to focus on four areas of study: theory, practice, research, and policy. The theoretical framework of intersectionality, which understands a person’s social location through the lens of privilege and oppression, most commonly race, gender, and class (Murphy et al., 2009) should be a focal point in the curriculum for undergraduate and graduate social work students.

Coursework relevant to developing knowledge about to dynamics of oppression and privilege, awareness to one’s own location within these dynamics, and being reflective about one’s developing professional identity is central to social work education. It is at a program’s discretion whether or not they offer additional coursework via certifications, electives, or specializations as it relates to a particular area of study.

Social work programs should consider adding required content on work with individuals who have experienced or been impacted by incarceration. Keeping in mind the participants of this study, many are fathers. As clearly documented in the literature, incarceration in the United States is at an all time high, and largely comprised of individuals representative of minority groups, with rates escalating among women and Hispanics. Wildeman & Western (2010) note that in the year 2000, almost 10% of Black children had a parent who was incarcerated on any given day. This data infers that at some point in their professional education and future career, a social work student will work with an individual
who has been incarcerated or with someone (e.g. child, adult, sibling) who is closely connected with a person who is, or has been, incarcerated.

Social workers oftentimes will work in underserved, under-resourced communities. It can be assumed that the agencies and programs are a) located in communities where formerly incarcerated individuals live; b) working with children and families that have been impacted by incarceration; and c) provide services to individuals and families largely representative of minority populations, including Black men. Social workers, directly or indirectly, are working with the formerly incarcerated population; they are fathers, sons, brothers, significant others, and community members. As a profession committed to social justice, social work programs must also make deliberate efforts to raise awareness and empathy in work with this population, their right to be treated with dignity and respect, and advocate for a shift from being viewed negatively (formerly incarcerated) to being recognized for their strengths and resilience (resiliently reintegrated).

**Direct Social Work Practice**

Two aspects central to professional social work practice seems fitting in light of these observations: a) caring, caretaking, and context are central to facilitating hope (Saleebey, 2009); and b) the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2008). As social workers we recognize the importance of human relationships and the critical importance of these bonds to the change process and a person’s overall well-being. Social work practitioners must also be facilitators of hope, and hope in the context of strengthening a person’s connection to one’s self, family, and larger social environment. Social workers are trained to be advocates for those who are disempowered, marginalized and oppressed. As a professional helper, we
must be willing to disrupt dominant discourses that are oppressive and discriminatory, shifting to language and approaches that are empowering and affirming.

The use of formal support was expressed as an important component of participants’ ability to desist from crime and resiliently reintegrate. The key findings of this research highlight both internal and external resilient characteristics and strengths among formerly incarcerated Black men. These characteristics, along with intrinsic and environmental supports, have been instrumental to this population of men in their efforts to desist from crime. Trained as practitioners committed to being culturally competent and empowering in their practice approaches, it is crucial for social workers to be intentionally attuned to dynamics of oppression and privilege in the services provided to the formerly incarcerated population. A discipline committed to career long post-graduate professional development as a requirement for licensure and practice, social workers should be required to complete a predetermined amount of continuing education credits in content related to power and privilege as this content is relevant to its social justice principles.

Working with this population, a social worker must a) acknowledge the value of the human person, despite past behaviors; b) facilitate a sense of hope, potential, and possibility within the individual regardless of challenges; and c) recognize the complex nature of being Black, male, and formerly incarcerated. Ongoing environmental and structural challenges that this population encounters in their ongoing efforts must be openly acknowledged, transparently discussed, and where needed, advocacy conducted on their behalf. The practitioner must be sensitive to and validating of the daily challenges this population encounters as a Black man and as one who identifies as formerly incarcerated. Jones et al., (2012) suggest integrating culturally specific practice interventions, such as an Africentric
framework. This perspective for practice takes into account an understanding of the social context in which Blacks live; the damaging effects of oppression and discrimination; and applying an intersectional lens of practice (e.g. decreasing feelings of alienation, worthlessness) that promote resilience. Such an approach is well substantiated by the findings and discussion of this research.

For participants, spirituality was viewed as an integral component of their efforts to stay out of prison. As many recounted through their stories of recovery and sobriety, the twelve step process, which are rooted in spiritual principles, has not only been pivotal in their desistance and ongoing efforts of resiliently reintegration, but also in their acts of service and support to others experiencing situations similar to theirs. As a profession, social work acknowledges, appreciates, and respects diversity among individuals and belief systems. Social workers will need to acknowledge and be sensitive to how individuals make meaning of their experiences and the power of prayer, deep faith, and the belief that there has been purpose even in trials.

**Implications for Policy**

The presence of social workers needs to increase and be intentional in legislative advocacy pertaining to criminal justice. The National Association of Social Workers, the professional organization of the discipline, outlines a legislative agenda each year. This agenda usually aligns with state and federal legislation that reflect elements that coincide with the mission and values of the profession. For example, in 2011 NASW submitted a letter of support for increased funding of the Second Chance Act, legislation focused on reentry initiatives for those transitioning from a correctional setting

FundingFY12.pdf. Advocacy and support is needed around legislative issues such as: felony disenfranchisement laws; CORI reform; stop and frisk policies; access to federal student loan programs for individuals with a felony conviction; and access to federally subsidized housing. These are policies that directly impact the marginalized population of formerly incarcerated individuals. Even for those who have resiliently reintegrated, these restrictions could still be barriers. Specifically as it relates to Black men, it must also be recognized the structural and systemic disadvantages this oppressed group faces. With the additional social stigma and stereotypes about those who have been incarcerated, given their training and professional expertise to work across systems of all sizes, social workers need to invest in agendas that promote empowerment, equity, and social justice for this group.

**Implications for Future Research**

This research was initially proposed because of the scarcity of literature available on desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men. Even with the disproportionate representation of Black men in the criminal justice system, and available literature that provides understanding of the many risk factors that heightens their involvement, it was equally important to gain knowledge and insight about how they are resilient and can successfully reintegrate in families and the larger social environment, and become contributing members of communities. The voice and experiences of Black men who have resiliently reintegrated need to be a more integral component of initiatives, programs, and services that are structured to meet the needs of individuals reentering communities and engaging in the process of reintegration. As many participants shared, they are committed to giving back. They feel their experiences were in some sense ‘on purpose’ in order to now be
a help to others. This population of men should be purposefully recruited for their desire to
give back and their expert knowledge from lived experiences.

It is also important to think about how the narratives shared could also provide insight
on how to engage youth identified as at risk. Young black males are disproportionately
represented in the juvenile justice system. With terms such as ‘proven risk’ and a growing
trend suggesting a school to prison pipeline, with a growing number of school districts,
particularly in urban communities, using the legal system as a practice intervention,
resiliently reintegrated Black men can share wisdom and insight from their own childhood
experiences, that could inform the use of developmentally appropriate psychosocial methods
instead of incarceration.

Conclusion

As a profession, social work needs to become increasingly aware, compassionate, and
empowering to those who have been incarcerated, and now having desisted from crime.
There must also be a deliberate effort to recognize and highlight those who have resiliently
reintegrated, with particular attention to the Black male population. A profession committed
to being culturally competent and whose value system opposes social injustice, social
workers are charged to do more. Pettus-Davis (2012) reminds us, as social workers, we are
needed to become more actively engaged in all aspects of criminal justice, particularly given
the disproportionate representation of minority and vulnerable populations within the
criminal justice system and the growing legislation to eliminate the civil rights of those who
have a felony conviction, regardless of whether or not they have ever served time in a prison
cell (i.e. felony disenfranchisement legislation). As social workers, we must become more
fully attuned to the value of the lived experience and stories shared. Trained to actively and
reflectively listen, as practitioners we must be willing to position ourselves as learners, garner insightful wisdom from the experts in resilient reintegration, and engage in collaborative work that restores and affirms. We must also think about the growing children, families, and communities impacted by incarceration and see this problem not as an individual issue, but one that is systemic and structural at its root and, refusing colorblind advocacy, become active in efforts to confront and disrupt these injustices.
References


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doi:10.1177/0032885509339507

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Letter for Agency Contacts
Appendix B: Study Flyer
Appendix C: Criteria for Inclusion Pre-Screen Checklist
Appendix D: Informed Consent
Appendix E: Interview Protocol
Appendix F: Transcription Confidentiality Agreement
Appendix G: Emotional Support Resource List
Appendix A

INFORMATION LETTER FOR AGENCY CONTACTS

Greetings!

My name is Wendy Champagnie Williams and I am a doctoral candidate at Simmons College School of Social Work. My dissertation is focused on the experience of desistance among formerly incarcerated adult Black men. Given the disproportionate representation of Black men in the criminal justice system and recidivism data, it is very important to learn about the experiences of Black men who have been to prison but have not gone back.

I am seeking to interview individuals who meet the following criteria:
- Identify as a Black male;
- At least 25 years old;
- Has at least one felony conviction;
- Not on probation or parole;
- Does not have any open or unresolved charges; and
- At least five years ago was discharged from a correctional facility (county, state, or federal) with no subsequent reconvictions or return to prison.

I am asking for interested men to take part in an interview to share how he has been successful in staying out of prison. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and will be digitally recorded. Participants will be given a $30 gift card to a local grocer as compensation for their participation. Meetings will take place in a public setting (e.g. public library) convenient for them. Space for meeting is also available at Simmons College and Wheelock College. All information gathered will be strictly confidential. If you know of someone who you think meets the criteria above and might be interested in taking part in this study, I am asking you to share the attached flyer with him. I also request that you inform them: “If you choose to participate in this study, please do not tell me” and “non-participation will have no impact on services that you receive.”

I am also available to meet or talk with you to answer any questions you may have about this study. I can be reached at (781) 789-8112. Also, if you would like to verify what I have shared here, you can also contact the chair of my dissertation committee, Kathy Millstein, PhD, at (617) 521-3921.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request. Have an exceptional day!

Sincerely,

Wendy Champagnie Williams, PhD(c), MSW, LICSW
Doctoral Candidate, Simmons College Graduate School of Social Work
Appendix B

BLACK MEN, PRISON, AND SUCCESS STUDY

Receive a $35 Stop & Shop gift card for participating in a 45-60 minute interview.

YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

Your voice is very important and needs to be heard.
We want to understand how formerly incarcerated adult Black men have been successful and have stayed out of prison.

We are very interested in knowing your experiences.
We are social workers who grew up and lived in Boston and saw firsthand the experiences of Black men. The experiences you share can help design support services and programs for Black men who are getting out of prison.

To participate and make your voice heard, you must:
- Identify as a Black man
- Be at least 25 years old
- Have at least (1) felony conviction
- Released from prison five or more years ago and haven’t gone back
- Not on probation or parole
- Have no open, unresolved charges

Great, you’re interested! Here are important next steps.
If you are interested in taking part in this study or have questions about the study, please contact Wendy Williams at (617) 521-2947. When you call, leave your name, phone number and the best time to be reached.
We will return your call as soon as possible.

Your Voice Counts!
Appendix C

Criteria for Inclusion: Pre-Screen Checklist

Date of Inquiry: _______________________

Participant must answer ‘YES’ to all of the following criteria statements:

- I identify as a Black male. [ ] NO [ ] YES
- I am at least 25 years old. [ ] NO [ ] YES
- I have at least one (1) felony conviction. [ ] NO [ ] YES
- I am not on probation or parole. [ ] NO [ ] YES
- I was discharged from a correctional facility (county, state, or federal) at least five (5) years ago. [ ] NO [ ] YES
- I have no open, unresolved charges. [ ] NO [ ] YES
- I have not had any reconvictions or returned to prison since getting out five or more years ago. [ ] NO [ ] YES

If inquiry meets ALL the criteria for participation, invite him to now schedule an interview. If he says yes, then schedule a date, time, and location for face to face interview. Remind him of his right to withdraw at any time.

Participant Name (participant to provide pseudonym)

__________________________________________________________

Participant Contact Information

Phone number: (______________________________)

Best time to reach: ________________________________

Appointment Time

__________________________________________________________
Appendix D

SIMMONS COLLEGE
Graduate School of Social Work
300 The Fenway Boston, MA 02215

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title  Against the odds: The experience of criminal desistance among formerly incarcerated Black men

Researcher  Wendy Champagnie Williams, MSW, LICSW
PhD Candidate, Simmons College Graduate School of Social Work

This information is being shared with you so you can decide whether or not you wish to take part in this study.

Statement of Purpose
The purpose of this study is to explore how formerly incarcerated adult Black men have been successful in staying out of prison. We want to know what your experiences are and how you continue to be successful.

Rights of the Participant
You can choose whether or not to take part in this study. Your participation is voluntary. You can withdraw at any time, even after the interview is finished. If an agency told you about this study you do not have to share this information with them and not taking part will not impact the services you receive.

Right to Privacy
The information shared in this interview will be kept private. Your name will not appear in any materials. The information we collect will be stored electronically in a password protected computer file. Only the researcher will have access to any identifying information. Every precaution shall be taken to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of the records and data pertaining to you in particular and the research program in general, disclosure of which may contribute to identifying you specifically to persons not related to this research program.

Risks and Benefits of Participation
There are no intended risks in taking part in this study. However, talking about your life experiences may cause feelings or memories that are uncomfortable. If this happens, you can contact me, Wendy Williams at (617) 521-2947 or call any of the resources on the list given to you. You will not be asked about specific things you did that led to your going to prison. Even if you begin to share this information, you will be directed to stop. Wendy is a mandated reporter and must report any threat to personal or public safety.
An important benefit of this study is the chance to share your experiences about how you have been successful. For some people, being able to talk about hard experiences and how they have overcome them, feels encouraging and makes them feel proud of what they have been able to accomplish. The information you share can be helpful to those who are also trying to stay out of prison and those who work to support this population.

Steps for Participation
We are asking you to take part in a 45-60 minute interview at a time and date that works best for you. Interviews will take place at a location in the local community that is convenient to you (Simmons College, Wheelock College, or public meeting space).

Permission to Participate
You and Wendy have read through this information together. You have had the chance to have this study explained to you and any questions you have answered. You know that this study has been approved by Simmons College before any research could begin and Wendy will be supervised by a faculty from Simmons. As a participant, you understand that you do not have to take part in this study and can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. Even if you withdraw, you will be able to keep the gift card. You also know you can contact Wendy after the interview at the number below if you experience any uncomfortable feelings. After reading through this with Wendy, you were given a copy of this consent.

Researcher Contact Information
Wendy Champagnie Williams, PhD(c), MSW, LICSW
Doctoral Candidate
(617) 521-2947
Email: wendy.williams@simmons.edu

Simmons College Contact Information
Kathleen Millstein, PhD
Chair, Doctoral Committee
Simmons College School of Social Work
(617) 521-3921
Email: kathleen.millstein@simmons.edu

Participant Permission
By marking ‘X’ in each box below, I give my consent to the following:

☐ I agree to participate in an interview.

☐ I have been given a copy of this consent form.

☐ I agree to have my interview digitally recorded.
Appendix E

Interview Protocol: Criminal Desistance and Black Men

Date: ___________________________ Interviewee Pseudonym: ________________

(Interviewer provides brief description of the project and overview of the interview process. Review of informed consent and remind participant of right to withdraw at any time.)

Part I: Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age at time of interview: ____________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong> (if interviewee chooses to specify) ________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Single, never married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Other (please describe) ____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If you have children, how many?____________</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Status</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Full-time, permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Full-time, temporary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Level of Education Achieved</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] some high school or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] GED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Associate’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Master’s degree or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] Vocational Certificate or Training, please specify area of skill ________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What felony convictions have you had?

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

What is the total amount of time you’ve served in prison?__________________________

____________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________

If you have been on probation or parole, what was your most recent date of discharge?
(month and year only)__________________________________________

When did you receive your most recent certificate of release from prison?
(month and year only)__________________________________________
Part II: Interview

Thank you again for taking part in this study. I really appreciate your willingness to share your experiences with me. That you have been successful in staying out of prison is very important and I am eager to learn about your experiences. I want you to feel comfortable to share and talk about your experiences in whatever way is meaningful to you. (Questions below may be asked in slightly modified ways to stimulate participant sharing of experiences.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>What have been your experiences in staying out of prison?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Probe: Who/ what helped to keep you from returning to prison?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Probe: How did this make a difference?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Probe: What/who supports your ability to move forward?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Probe: How are you able to keep yourself encouraged?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Probe: What is it about you – characteristics, qualities, assets – that have helped you to be successful and not return to prison?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Probe: How did you ‘bounce back’ – reintegrate – after being released from prison?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Probe: What/who motivates you to stay out of prison?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Question 2 | I’d like to get your thoughts and ideas about what you think human service professionals (social workers) can do to help support Black men to not return to prison. |

| Question 3 | Before we end, is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven’t talked about? |

Thank you so much for your time and taking part in this interview. Your experiences are very important and I really appreciate your sharing with me. As we talked about before, talking about your experiences may bring uncomfortable memories or feelings. This list (remind him about Appendix G – Support Resources List) has suggested resources for support. If you have questions or need help with connecting with resources, please feel free to contact me.

Appendix E
Interview Protocol
Appendix F

Confidentiality Agreement
Transcription Services

I, ___________________________ transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all digital recordings and documentation received from Wendy Williams related to her doctoral study on criminal desistance. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of digitally-recorded interviews, or in any associated documents;

2. To not make copies of any digital recordings or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Wendy Williams;

3. To store all study-related digital recordings and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;

4. To return all digital recordings and study-related documents to Wendy Williams in a complete and timely manner.

5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the digital recordings and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber’s name (printed) ________________________________

Transcriber’s signature ________________________________

Date ________________________________

Form adapted from templates retrieved from:
https://secure.myunion.edu/Forms/IRB/IRB016.doc and
www.purdue.edu/research/.../Confidentiality_Agreement_2011.pdf
Appendix G

Support Resource List

Thank you again for taking part in this research study. Should you experience any discomfort as a result of having shared your experiences, please feel free to access any of the following:

1. Contact me, Wendy Williams, the researcher for this study at (617) 521-2947. I can help you connect with support.

2. Contact your primary care provider (doctor, health center). Most health centers provide support services and an appointment can be made for follow up with one of their counselors.

3. Contact any of the following agencies who provide a variety of support services (some specifically for men):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPAN, Inc.</th>
<th>Father Friendly Initiative (FFI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>105 Chauncy Street, 6th floor</td>
<td>Finland Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston, MA 02111</td>
<td>774 Albany Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(617) 423-0750</td>
<td>Boston, MA 02118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(617) 534-9525</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whittier St. Health Center</th>
<th>Boston Medical Center</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men’s Health Program</td>
<td>Social Work Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1290 Tremont St.</td>
<td>88 East Newton Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxbury, MA 02120</td>
<td>Boston, MA 02118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(617) 427-1000</td>
<td>(617) 414-5245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men’s Health Partnership Center for Community Health</th>
<th>Fenway Health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>250 Washington St., 4th floor</td>
<td>Behavioral Health Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston, MA 02108</td>
<td>1340 Boylston Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(617) 624-5401</td>
<td>Boston, MA 02215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>617.267.0900</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Services of Greater Boston</th>
<th>This resource has multiple locations.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31 Heath St.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston, MA 02130</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(617) 523-6400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Support services for fathers also offered.