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Nova Southeastern University, christal1clark1@gmail.com

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Examining the Impact of Postsecondary Correctional Education Programs on Participant Self-Stigmatization: The Student Perspective

by
Christal M. Clark

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Nova Southeastern University
2023

Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Christal Clark, under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Philosophy at Nova Southeastern University.

Approved: _____ 8/15/2023
Grace Telesco, Ph.D. Date:
Committee Chair

Approved: _____ 8/15/2023
Jennifer Allen, Ph.D. Date:
Committee Member

Approved: _____ 8/15/2023
Darl Champion, Ed.D. Date:
Committee Member

Approved: Marcelo Castro 8/15/2023
Marcelo Castro, Ph.D. Date:
Associate Dean

Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Christal M. Clark_____
Name

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Date

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A heartfelt thanks to my best friend and husband, Larry, who has provided unwavering support and encouragement to help me achieve this educational milestone. There is no one else I would rather share this accomplishment (and my life) with than him.

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I was compelled to explore the impact of correctional education programs after teaching incarcerated students at a local prison. Because I had no previous experience with postsecondary education inside a correctional facility, I wasn't sure what to expect. I observed students, many who had never set or completed goals, overcome academic and personal difficulties to successfully graduate with college degrees. Their determination, diligence, and dedication to study was nothing like I'd ever seen and because of that experience, as an educator, I am forever changed. My hope for past, present, and future PSCEP students is they never stop learning.

"Education is the key that unlocks the golden door to freedom"
– George Washington Carver

Abstract

Examining the Impact of Postsecondary Correctional Education Programs on Participant Self-Stigmatization: The Student Perspective. Christal Clark, 2023: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: Correctional education, Prison education programs, Self-stigmatization of formerly incarcerated persons.

Legislators and correctional administrators are tasked with problem-solving current issues of mass incarceration and high criminal recidivism rates. Part of the solution is to implement successful rehabilitative initiatives through reentry programming. While Postsecondary Correctional Education programs are proven to reduce recidivism and assist formerly incarcerated persons in obtaining employment, little is known about the effects of obtaining a college degree in prison on individual self-stigmatization.

Self-stigmatization can occur when a member of a marginalized group experiences poor self-concept. Those with mental illness, criminal histories, addiction, etc. are often viewed as undesirable by mainstream society. In an attempt to manage negative experiences, individuals who have been incarcerated may become isolated, sever personal relationships, and are reluctant to participate in daily activities most citizens experience. As a result, their successful reintegration back into the community may be sabotaged.

To provide a better understanding of the effect education has on formerly justice-involved individuals' self-stigmatization, this dissertation explores the lived experiences of those persons who have completed their college degrees while in prison. A qualitative method was used to gather data from former students who have participated in correctional education programs.

The resultant data explains individuals' experiences of self-stigmatization while seeking employment and reconnecting with family and gives perspectives about their futures, since completing their educational programs. The data further details the role education plays in mediating feelings of self-stigmatization for formerly justice-involved individuals. The knowledge will aid correctional administrators in measuring the efficacy of correctional education programs to decide if more programs are needed or if improvements can be made to existing programs to ensure successful rehabilitation and community reentry of incarcerated persons.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nature of the Research Problem

Understanding the impact of postsecondary correctional education programs on the self-stigmatization of formerly incarcerated persons is challenging. Self-stigmatization refers to the process by which an individual internalizes negative attitudes and beliefs about themselves due to their membership in a particular group (Evans et al., 2017). This can lead to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and reduced self-efficacy. Someone with a mental illness may believe he is weak or defective because of his condition, and this belief can, in turn, make it more difficult for him to seek help or recover. Having a negative self-concept can also exacerbate the effects of discrimination and prejudice from others (Moore & Tangney, 2017).

Self-stigmatization is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that can be difficult to measure. Because there are no clear-cut methods for assessing self-stigma, individuals may experience it in different ways. The experience of incarceration, and the process of re-entry into society, can be highly varied and unique to each individual. Factors such as the length of time served, the nature of the offense, and the support available upon release can all affect the individual's experience.

The impact of postsecondary correctional education programs (PSCEPs) on the formerly incarcerated person’s self-concept may vary, depending on the specific program, the level of participation and engagement, and the individual's own goals and motivations. There may be other factors that influence self-stigmatization. Societal attitudes towards people with criminal records, discrimination, and access to resources may be difficult to control or measure (Moore et al., 2018). Research studies are crucial

to understand the effects of postsecondary education on self-stigmatization, but are also challenging to conduct due to the intricacy of the factors involved. Additionally, longitudinal research projects can be especially costly, further complicating study on the effects of PSCEPs on an individual's self-concept.

Self-stigmatization can have a significant negative impact on individuals with criminal past. Previously justice-involved individuals who have been incarcerated may internalize the negative stereotypes and beliefs about people with criminal records, which includes that they are dangerous, unreliable, or morally deficient. This can lead to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and reduced self-efficacy. They may not want to reveal their criminal pasts to others, which can cause difficulties in obtaining employment, housing, or other necessities to successfully reintegrate into society (Keene et al., 2018). These results can perpetuate a cycle of poverty and marginalization, creating obstacles for released persons to reenter society. Individuals with poor self-esteem often lack the inner strength and willpower to seek help or support to overcome the challenges they face.

Social science studies examining the efficacy of correctional education programming are limited as they involve incarcerated persons, who are a protected population in the research field. Because of their confinement status, justice-involved individuals have a diminished ability to consent, which limits researchers to unique ethical boundaries in which they must conduct research activities (Mastrorilli, 2016). Gaining the cooperation of anyone to participate in research is a daunting task, but attempting to recruit participants from vulnerable populations is especially arduous. Marginalized groups, such as justice-involved individuals, are a difficult population to

recruit, even when they can be located. Those who have been released from prison, but who are not under conditions of parole or community supervision, are a particularly problematic group to reach due to factors such as poverty, lack of transportation, or limited access to technology (Trimbur, 2009). They are often transient and change employment frequently, which makes outreach and recruiting participants tough.

The process of social sciences qualitative research often involves focus groups or interviews and as a result, lacks the anonymity of other types of research studies. Vulnerable populations may have a history of being marginalized or mistreated, which can lead to a lack of trust in institutions and researchers. This can make it difficult to establish relationships and gain the trust of potential participants. Individuals from disenfranchised populations may distrust the research process, as sharing personal details of their experiences reinforces feelings of self-stigmatization they struggle to overcome (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). Likewise, they may be hesitant to participate in research studies due to fear of discrimination or negative consequences. This can be especially true for individuals with criminal records, but also for immigrants, or those experiencing homelessness, as they may not understand the research process or how their contributions could affect their daily lives. Many previously incarcerated persons may have competing demands on their time, lacking the flexibility to participate in studies. Those who are working multiple jobs or have limited childcare options are unlikely to see the value in their participation as they struggle to pay bills and provide the necessities to care for their children.

According to the Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with over 2 million people held in

federal and state prisons, as well as local jails (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). The number of people incarcerated in the United States has been steadily increasing since the 1970s, with the prison population more than quadrupling since 1980. In recent years, there has been a decrease in the number of people incarcerated, and some states have implemented policies to reduce their prison population. Although the exact number of people incarcerated can vary, depending on the source and the date, these numbers are alarming.

Approximately 95% of all incarcerated persons will eventually be released into the community (James, 2015). Annually, high numbers of justice-involved individuals are discharged from confinement and placed under some form of community or parole supervision. In 2019, at least 70% of individuals released from state correctional facilities were on probation or parole (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2020). There were 862,100 persons on parole supervision in the United States at the end of 2020 (Kaeble, 2021). Statistics would suggest a robust population of potential research subjects exists, when in reality, other factors serve as obstacles, preventing them from participating. The group of returning citizens consists of a unique subset of society, in part, because of their high-risk lifestyles. Their struggles include greater rates of homelessness, substance abuse, and mental illness compared to other citizens (Fahmy et al., 2022). Once they are released, finding suitable housing and employment can be problematic because of their criminal pasts. Unless substance abuse and mental health treatment are conditions of parole, some individuals return to addiction and criminal activities, which makes follow-up on their reintegration experiences difficult (Stapulonis & Kovac, 2004).

Upon completion of their sentences, the remaining 30% or less of formerly incarcerated persons are released without conditions, and are under no obligation to

maintain contact with the Department of Corrections. Because those persons are no longer under the watchful eyes of the criminal justice system, locating them to recruit for participation in post-release research can be difficult.

Historically, research regarding the efficacy of PSCEPs has been limited to recidivism and employment rates (Bozick et al., 2018). According to the National Institute of Justice, recidivism is determined by the rate at which individuals who have been released from prison re-offend and return to prison, specifically within three years post-release. Past research has focused primarily on recidivism rates because it is a relatively easy outcome to measure. Data collection is based on official records of re-arrest and re-incarceration, which are readily available, making it convenient for researchers to use in evaluating the effectiveness of PSCEPs. Low recidivism is seen as an important indicator of program success (Hall, 2015). Reducing recidivism rates is a key goal of the criminal justice system, as it can lead to cost savings, reduced crime rates, and improved public safety. Providing educational opportunities to inmates can have a positive impact on reducing recidivism. Those who participate in educational programs while in prison are 43% less likely to return to prison after being released compared to those who do not participate in such programs (Davis, 2019).

Because postsecondary correctional education programs have existed for years, there is ample support in terms of their positive impact on recidivism. However, more exploration is needed into how PSCEPs may affect other aspects of an individual's life after prison. While the extent of the impact may be different for everyone, lengthier sentences result in more negative, long-lasting outcomes. Studies have acknowledged the

long-term, adverse effects of incarceration on people as it can impact mental health, relationships with family, and overall self-esteem.

Employment is seen as an important indicator of a PSCEP's success as it can help formerly incarcerated individuals to reintegrate into society and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Individuals who are employed are less likely to commit crimes and return to prison as having a steady source of legitimate income allows them to provide financial stability for their families and to reduce poverty in households where money instabilities previously existed (Sheppard & Ricciardelli, 2020). Employment is a relatively easy outcome to measure, as it can be tracked through official records such as unemployment insurance, wage records, and other government data. Likewise, having a job is an important aspect of self-esteem and helps to build a sense of belonging and purpose to individuals in their communities. Employment is a key factor in reducing recidivism rates, as it can lead to cost savings, reduced crime rates, and improved public safety (Berger-Gross, 2022).

Using recidivism and employment rates as the only measures of program efficacy has been criticized for being too narrow and not capturing the full range of outcomes that are important to individuals who are formerly incarcerated, their families and society. In order to accurately assess how educating incarcerated persons affects self-stigmatization, one must understand the positive impact it can have on successful reintegration and social well-being of those individuals. There is limited research to assess how participation in an education program during incarceration might mitigate some of the negative effects of imprisonment on the individual's self-esteem.

Examining whether having a college degree affects self-stigmatization is critical because educational achievement can increase self-esteem and self-worth. Obtaining a college degree can provide a sense of accomplishment and validation for the individual, which can help counteract feelings of shame associated with his criminal past. The longer a person has been imprisoned, the more likely he will have a negative self-concept, which is a long-term consequence of incarceration (LeBel, 2012). Education can provide a new sense of identity, where the previous one might have been related to criminal behavior. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, more than half of justice-involved persons have only a General Equivalency Diploma and of those, 24% were earned during incarceration (Couloute, 2018).

Leaving prison with a college degree can increase an individual's chances of becoming gainfully employed. With approximately 600,000 incarcerated persons being released annually, the workforce is inundated with job seekers (Bender et. al., 2016). In the past, persons with felony convictions were often discriminated against as they sought work upon release. Many industries have become more welcoming to persons with criminal histories, particularly those with college degrees in certain topics. Positions in these fields have no licensing requirements or restrictions that would prevent individuals with criminal records from becoming valued employees.

Determining the role of PSCEPs on the individual's self-concept is important as successful reintegration saves money. Incarceration comes at a high cost and accounts for a significant portion of state and federal budgets. Because state and federal resources are limited, investing in effective programs has become of vital importance. Rehabilitative programs found to offer little benefit to assist in the successful reentry of incarcerated

persons are likely to be eliminated. Preparing an ex-offender to return to the community and to become a productive, law-abiding member of society is the goal of prison reentry programs. While various programs have been implemented to aid in prisoner reintegration efforts, some appear to be more successful than others. Prisoners often lack the skills and education to meet their basic needs and are forced into criminal activity to survive. Correctional facilities attempt to address deficiencies by offering GEDs and job skills training to inmates. To further bridge the gap that exists by having minimal training and education, completing a postsecondary program while incarcerated has been shown to improve offender self-esteem, help manage stigmatization associated with having a criminal background, and facilitate reconnection to his family and community (Evans et al., 2018).

Self-stigmatization can impede an individual's ability to engage in his community. Many formerly incarcerated persons have experienced the stigma associated with having a criminal record as they apply for work, look for housing, and attempt to reconnect with their families upon being released. Those who have been imprisoned before may expect to be discriminated against, which can cause maladaptive coping strategies like social withdrawal (Moore & Tangney, 2017). A person who avoids others, out of fear of having his criminal past exposed, is at a high risk for losing systems of support, which are essential to becoming a productive member of society. Graduating from college can provide a sense of community, and the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of people, which can help to counteract feelings of isolation and marginalization. Lastly, obtaining a college degree can provide a sense of hope and

opportunity for a better future, which can help those with criminal pasts move forward into building better lives for themselves and their families.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study is to understand how participating in a Postsecondary Correctional Education Program (PSCEP) impacts the self-stigmatization of formerly incarcerated individuals.

Background and Significance

While research studies about correctional education programs may be considerable, it has primarily focused on recidivism and employment rates, leaving a gap in the literature that specifically addressing the impact of PSCEPs on the individual's self-concept. There is much value in knowing if there are additional benefits of PSCEPs, beyond recidivism and employment.

The goals of correctional systems are to protect the public by ensuring that individuals who have been convicted of crimes are held accountable for their actions, and to provide opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration into society. While imprisonment is punishment and intended to serve as a deterrent to others, correctional facilities are also tasked with preparing the individual for reentry into his community by restoring him to a better version of himself, prior to incarceration. Mission and vision statements like "Inspiring success by transforming one life at a time" (Florida Department of Corrections) and "We enhance public safety and promote successful community reintegration through education, treatment and active participation in rehabilitative and restorative justice programs" (California Department of Corrections

and Rehabilitation) suggest rehabilitation to be the primary function of their corrections facilities.

In response, each institution is staffed with personnel who assess the inmate and develop a customized plan that will provide him with the tools and resources needed to overcome the underlying issues that led to his criminal behavior. These resources can include obtaining his GED, job training, substance abuse treatment, and other programs. Some prisons have expansive reentry programs, which include postsecondary education opportunities for those meeting certain academic criteria. Ultimately, his time in prison is not designed to punitive only, but to prepare him to become a productive member of society upon release.

Measuring the success of PSCEPs, based solely on whether an offender returns to prison, is limiting and does not accurately represent the potential benefits of programs like it. Quantitative statistics obtained from research studies of released offenders can provide valuable information about the effectiveness of postsecondary correctional education programs (PSCEPs) in reducing recidivism and increasing employment rates. However, these studies may not identify the full range of outcomes that are important to formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and the community as they do not capture the human aspect benefits of PSCEPs.

Recidivism and employment studies often focus on short-term outcomes, and may not capture the long-term effects of PSCEPs on individuals' lives. Such research may not consider the impact of education on an individual’s overall well-being, mental health, and social functioning. Studies that focus on employment rates may not take into account the quality of employment obtained by individuals who have completed PSCEPs. Even when

a person is employed, he may have low-paying, unstable, or part-time work, which may not be sufficient to support himself and his family. Limiting research to focus on these outcomes may reveal if a person returns to prison or is able to get a job, but do not measure how getting a college degree made a difference in the way he views himself.

Discovering that educating incarcerated persons has real world benefits, beyond the parameters of seeing them become employed or simply staying out of prison, is an added perk of postsecondary correctional education programs. Improving the individual's view of himself should be the primary mission of any rehabilitation program as numerous stakeholders stand to benefit from his success. A program with evidence in support of the benefits it provides is likely to be expanded.

The previously incarcerated individual is designated to be the primary beneficiary of PSCEPs. As the self-stigmatization of having a criminal past is reduced, the person is likely to function well in society and has a decreased likelihood of returning to prison. An overall improvement in the way a person views himself can filter over into other aspects of life, to include that of relationships with family, the community, and society as a whole. Failure to properly investigate postsecondary education programs' impact on self-stigmatization of formerly incarcerated persons could result in programs that do not work.

Without a proper understanding of the impact of PSCEPs on self-stigmatization, future reentry programs may not be designed in a way that effectively addresses their needs. A program that does not properly identify obstacles unique to their successful reentry may be met with resistance by participants. This can lead to ineffective programs being eliminated due to a perceived lack of significance. It is crucial that policymakers

and funders understand the importance of investing in postsecondary education programs for formerly incarcerated individuals, otherwise they may not allocate the funding necessary for certain reentry programs to continue. Citizens often resist the idea of using taxpayer funds for correctional programming as they view the role of prisons to be punitive, not rehabilitative. Despite the reality a majority of imprisoned persons will eventually return to the community, people do not recognize a need to educate criminal offenders. However, failure to provide the tools needed for released persons with criminal histories to function independently in society is setting them up for failure. Likewise, a lack of understanding of the impact of PSCEPs on self-stigmatization prevents reentry programs from identifying and treating the underlying issues that led to criminal behavior, which can perpetuate a cycle of incarceration. Without a change in mindset or approach to life, it is common for people to revert back to what they know.

Individuals who have been incarcerated may have limited job skills and experience difficulty, finding and maintaining employment upon release. Without gainful employment, individuals experience food insecurities or may be unable to maintain stable housing. In response, he may be more likely to resort to criminal behavior as a means of survival. A formerly justice-involved individual who is released into the community without receiving treatment for mental illness or substance abuse, is unlikely to successfully reintegrate into society. Many who have undiagnosed or untreated mental health conditions are known to become violent or self-medicate, which can impede their ability to maintain legitimate employment, meet financial commitments, and engage in meaningful relationships with their families. Often times, consequences of these behaviors are negative interactions with law enforcement and re-arrest.

Societal attitudes and discrimination towards individuals with criminal records can make it difficult for them to find employment, housing, and other basic needs. This can lead to increased stress and difficulties in reintegration, which can cause a released person to return to past criminal activities. When this occurs, it poses a safety risk to society. Members of vulnerable populations may have difficulty navigating daily life, particularly those who have served longer sentences. The end result for most is they will be arrested, imprisoned, and the cycle of recidivism continues. The resources invested in PSCEPs are such that an extensive study into all potential advantages and disadvantages is warranted.

The existing literature is inundated with studies about the impact of postsecondary correctional education programs on recidivism and employment for previously incarcerated persons. The intent of this study is to further understand these groups as they make-up a large percentage of the total U.S. population. By studying the trend of reentry experiences through the lens of college program participants, the researcher will conceptualize, and in aggregate form, create another data point, which will add findings to the current social sciences research about postsecondary correctional education programs.

Barriers and Issues

There will be barriers, both expected and unexpected, as with any research project. Anticipated hurdles to this study are (1) locating released persons for recruitment (2) gaining the trust and cooperation of participants to be interviewed and (3) IRB approval.

The researcher has concerns about locating persons to participate in the research

study as former justice-involved persons often experience difficulty, securing stable housing and employment. Many may not have access to reliable transportation, which can make it difficult to conduct in-person interviews or follow-up assessments (Morani et. al., 2011). Despite an extensive reintegration plan prepared by the assigned classification officer while the individual is incarcerated, plans are subject to change in the days prior to his official release date.

An additional concern is getting formerly incarcerated persons to agree to participate in the study. As with any group, not everyone will participate in research, for various reasons. Recruiting participants from vulnerable populations, such as individuals who have been released from prison, can be challenging. Many individuals may be hesitant to participate in research studies due to mistrust of researchers, personal and professional time constraints, or concerns about privacy. The researcher has been involved with a local PSCEP since 2018, fulfilling roles as a teacher and later, as the college liaison for the program. As a liaison, the researcher handled administrative duties related to the program, which required extensive interactions between herself and program participants. Although these professional relationships worked well when participants were incarcerated, the researcher is unsure if former students who have been released will agree to participate in the research study.

Ex-offenders differ from other citizens in that they are suspicious and more distrustful of others. Although the researcher has developed a rapport with program participants, she will be need to adopt a different strategy when interacting with them as released persons. She intends to encourage cooperation by being completely forthcoming about the study - its purpose, who will see the results, and how their contribution can

affect the future of postsecondary correctional education programs. Assuring them any opinions and experiences they provide will remain anonymous is likely to glean more truthful information. To ensure participant anonymity, interview instructions will explain that the overall findings will be reported for the group and not as individuals, unless they consent to have their unique perspectives shared.

Privacy is a significant concern when working with individuals who have been released from prison, as their lives in prison were void of privacy. A research participant must feel certain his personal information will be kept confidential, otherwise he is unlikely to share those details voluntarily.

Deciding to conduct research involving human subjects requires the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure ethical practices are being followed and human rights are preserved. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated persons are designated as a vulnerable population because of their involuntary confinement and susceptibility to coercion. The researcher will take the steps necessary to comply with the conditions of the IRB and conduct ethical research in the recruitment of participants and in the design and collection of data through qualitative interviewing.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions are provided for key terms that are used in this dissertation:

Formerly incarcerated person - An individual who has been imprisoned but has been released.

Justice-involved individual – Anyone who has been placed in jail or prison as a result of his or her interaction within the criminal justice system.

Postsecondary Correctional Education Program – College education program (excluding vocational or trade skills training, for the purpose of this study) which allows incarcerated individuals to pursue their college degrees.

Previously incarcerated person – A person individual who has been released from prison.

Recidivism - Committing a new offense or violating the conditions of probation or parole that results in arrest and/or confinement following a release from prison.

Reincarceration – Returning to confinement following a release from prison.

Reentry - The transition of a formerly justice-involved individual from prison to the community.

Reintegration - The process of a released citizen returning to the community.

Returning citizen – An individual who has been imprisoned and is released from confinement into the community.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Questions

History of College Programs in Prison

Offering any type of educational program in a correctional setting is not a new concept, but instead, is a long-standing practice that has existed for hundreds of years. In the early 19th century, William Rogers, a Quaker clergyman, established an education program at the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The program was designed to provide inmates with basic education and vocational training and was one of the first of its kind in the United States. The curriculum included subjects such as reading, writing, math, history, and religion. Inmates were also taught skills such as carpentry and shoemaking. Rogers' work at the Walnut Street Jail prompted the creation of similar programs at other correctional facilities across the country (Chlup, 2005).

The first postsecondary education program offered in prison was in 1834, when faculty from Harvard Divinity College began tutoring adult (male) inmates on various topics at Massachusetts State Prison (Gehring, 1997). Funding to educate inmates has historically been through private schools and donations, however, in 1972, implementation of the federal Pell Grant program provided public funding to support low-income students who wished to pursue postsecondary education. Under the original Pell Grant initiative, inmates were eligible to receive and use monies to pursue their college degrees.

In 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA). The bill, which was signed into law by President Bill Clinton, included several provisions that restricted funding for post-secondary education programs in prisons. Although the purpose of the VCCLEA was to be tough-on-crime, its passing

nullified inmate eligibility for Pell Grant program funds, bringing government-funded postsecondary education opportunities in correctional facilities to a halt (Boggs, 2019). The impact of the 1994 Crime Bill on educational opportunities for inmates was significant. Many prison education programs were forced to close or scale back their offerings due to the lack of funding. This reduction of educational opportunities for inmates is likely to have had a negative impact on recidivism rates and the rehabilitation and successful reintegration of prisoners. The Second Chance Act (SCA) of 2007, a federal law signed by President George W. Bush, provided $165 million in funding to improve the reentry of ex-offenders, including the implementation of education and vocational training programs in Federal and State correctional facilities. Its design was to encourage Americans to give previously incarcerated persons a second chance and to make community and social services available to help them secure suitable housing, job skills training and placement, and other resources to promote successful reentry (Obatusin & Ritter-Williams, 2019). The primary goals of the SCA of 2007 were to increase public safety and reduce the operating costs of prisons by investing programs intended to reduce recidivism (Bureau of Justice Assistance, n. d.).

As prison overcrowding continued to be problematic, lawmakers took a second look at alternatives to incarceration and ways to improve existing reentry programs. Under the Obama administration, the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program (SCPPP) initiative began in 2015, which restored eligibility for inmates to participate in postsecondary education programs in prison using Pell Grant funds (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The SCPPP was open to incarcerated individuals in state and federal prisons who were within five years of release and had no outstanding debts to the

Department of Education. Pell Grants are need-based federal financial aid that can be used to cover the cost of tuition, fees, and other educational expenses at participating institutions of higher education. The program was launched as a five-year pilot, which permitted approximately 12,000 incarcerated individuals to receive Pell Grants to pursue postsecondary education. The program was part of the Obama administration's "Education to Workforce" initiative, aimed at providing educational opportunities to individuals who were incarcerated, to help them successfully reintegrate into society.

The first SCPPP initiative prompted 67 postsecondary institutions to offer opportunities for inmates to earn their college degrees throughout 27 states (Boggs, 2019). The Second Chance Pell Pilot Program is one of the primary government-funded postsecondary education programs being offered in prisons. According to guidelines established by the Department of Education (2021), it “will test whether participation in high-quality educational opportunities increases after access to financial aid for incarcerated adults is expanded and examine how waiving the restriction on providing Pell Grants to individuals incarcerated in Federal or State penal institutions influences academic and life outcomes”.

Department of Education initiatives, such as the Second Chance Pell program, have attempted to bridge the gap by offering prisoners the opportunity to complete their college degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While there are many research studies on correctional education, the scope of information is grounded in recidivism statistics, despite other benefits programs provide. Since its inception in 2015, 22,000 inmates have enrolled in a SCPPP (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The program has helped many released persons to acquire new skills, enhance their knowledge, and

increased their chances of finding good jobs. Graduates of SCPPPs have increased earning potential, which helps meet financial obligations by supporting themselves and their families, and to avoid returning to a life of crime.

Many inmates enter prison with educational deficiencies and work experience. A lengthy sentence can negatively affect an ex-offender's transition into the workforce upon release (Landersø, 2015). Because an individual's education and skills upon re-entering society after incarceration impacts his ability to successfully reintegrate, it is critical to ensure he obtains the tools needed during his incarceration to compete in the labor market. Participation in a SCPP program has helped many released persons feel good about themselves, to overcome feelings of shame and stigmatization, and to believe in their ability to succeed. Education can be a powerful tool for building self-esteem and self-worth, which can be beneficial for individuals' reintegration into society.

Similar to state correctional facilities, the Federal Bureau of Prisons offers various programs to assist those in-custody with obtaining their GEDs, developing parenting skills, and literacy classes, specifically - English as a second language. The BOP also facilitates vocational and occupational training programs, based on workforce needs. Some postsecondary education programs are available to federal inmates, but many are at a cost to the individual as Second Chance Pell Pilot Programs are not offered in BOP facilities (Federal Bureau of Prisons, n.d.).

Educating Incarcerated Persons

Social sciences research is inundated with studies, investigating the advantages and disadvantages of providing postsecondary education programs in prisons. Results

show significant benefits in areas such as increased employability, lowered costs to taxpayers, and improved mental health and self-concept (Baranger et al., 2018).

Participation in an educational program during incarceration can increase an individual's chances of obtaining gainful employment, by providing former inmates with the skills and knowledge they need to be marketable in today's workforce. Prior to being imprisoned, many justice-involved individuals live in poverty. It is widely accepted that the prison population disproportionately includes members from racially-segregated, low-income communities (Gibbons & Ray, 2021). Prisoners who participated in vocational or academic programs during incarceration were able to secure gainful employment at a rate 13 percent higher than those who did not participate in either program (RAND Corporation, 2013). Obtaining a degree while incarcerated increases an individual's chances of getting a higher paying job, which can allow him to financially support himself and his family, and increase his chances for successful reintegration. Being employed also provides a sense of purpose and belonging, and can contribute to a more positive self-image.

Taxpayer monies spent for the supervision, housing, and care of inmates, along with the costs associated to operate correctional facilities, continue to increase annually. The Vera Institute in New York conducted a survey of each state regarding the "annual average cost of housing one inmate" and the results were staggering. Of the responding 45 states, the average was $33,274, ranging from a low $14,780 in Alabama to $69,355 in New York (Vera Institute, 2015). The cost of housing federal inmates is slightly higher, averaging $34,770 annually (United States Courts, 2017). Estimates do not include expenses associated with treating inmates with considerable medical, dental, or

mental health issues, which can significantly increase correctional operating costs. Education is a cost-effective way to reduce recidivism and the overall cost of incarceration. The benefits of education significantly outweigh the costs of prison in the long run. According to a study conducted by RAND Corporation (2013), "the direct costs of providing education are estimated to be from $1,400 to $1,744 per inmate, with re-incarceration costs being $8,700 to $9,700 less for each inmate who received correctional education as compared to those who did not". Investing money into educational programs for incarcerated persons is cost-effective, even when an educational program participant returns to prison.

Correctional Education and Recidivism

Historically, recidivism rates have been used as a political talking point to gain taxpayer support of postsecondary correctional education programs (Gould, 2018). Recidivism statistics are a primary source of research data used to assess the effectiveness of prison reentry programs as they are easily assembled by gathering court, jail, and prison records. While data contained within official reports is considered to be reliable, there is no national standard by which recidivism data is gathered, which can be problematic when relying on recidivism rates as a measurement of "what works" in correctional rehabilitation (Klingele, 2019). Some research studies determine recidivism, according to conviction and incarceration data, while others present recidivism data based solely on re-arrest statistics.

The National Institute of Justice (n.d.), in its report *Recidivism*, defines it as "measured by criminal acts that resulted in re-arrest, reconviction or return to prison, with or without a new sentence during a three-year period following the person's release".

Irregularities among reporting requirements that exist between jails and prisons further complicate official records as jails hold arrestees and some convicted persons serving short sentences while prisons house those with longer sentences to serve (Ruggero et. al, 2015). Often times, information from the two entities can be misconstrued and necessitate a closer inspection of records before including them in recidivism rate data. According to *Measuring Recidivism*, a publication by the National Institute of Justice (n.d.), using arrest reports as the only means of substantiating recidivism can be misleading since the data captured does not include undetected crimes. While no study is without errors, those that rely on self-reporting by justice-involved individuals to establish whether they have been re-arrested or re-incarcerated may be inaccurate, as very few will admit to crimes they have committed.

Recidivism rates can be useful data among various factors when determining prison reentry program effectiveness but should not be the only consideration. In *Improving Recidivism as a Performance Measure*, King and Elderbroom (2014) suggest different ways to use recidivism data constructively. The first step is to avoid using only one measure to define successes or failures, but instead, use multiple measurements to define it. When reporting recidivism data, states typically identify recidivists to be persons who are re-arrested, convicted, and return to prison after three years. To give an accurate representation of who makes up recidivism data, states could also report desistance statistics, to include formerly incarcerated persons who never return to prison.

King and Elderbroom (2014) caution that using recidivism as the only tool to measure an education program's success or failure can create an inaccurate view of the facts. Instead, it is suggested that program efficacy be examined using various methods,

to get a true account of its impact on the successful integration of justice-involved individuals.

Correctional Education and Employment

In order to experience successful reintegration post-incarceration, an individual must be able to secure stable employment. According to Nally et. al (2012), unemployment rates are notably higher among those who have been to prison compared to the general population. While finding work upon reentry may have its challenges, barriers to employment for released persons may exist on two separate platforms – employers and formerly justice-involved individuals themselves.

Prior research suggests an American society that has not always been hospitable to individuals with criminal pasts, but recent changes indicate otherwise. Goodstein and Petrich (2019) conducted a qualitative study, examining the employer's perspective and experiences when hiring and working with formerly justice-involved individuals. Their findings were mostly positive and that employers who were willing to give second chances to formerly justice-involved persons found humble, hard-working employees who were appreciative of being given a second chance, and as a result, were invaluable contributors to their businesses. Some managers who hired previously incarcerated individuals had concerns about past offenses. Deciding to employ individuals with assaultive, violent, or sexually deviant histories was given careful consideration as maintaining the safety and protection of other staff was of particular concern. Managers whose businesses required employees to interact with customers at their homes were hesitant to hire those with criminal histories because of the potential exposure to vulnerable persons – the elderly, women, or children. Once hired, individuals who were

unable to leave addiction and criminal behavior lifestyles behind became problematic, as they were tardy or missed work altogether, as a result of re-arrest or court appearances.

Previously justice-involved people, particularly those who have been incarcerated multiple times, realize the employment process will be one of the greatest challenges they face upon reentry. The stigma associated with having a criminal background can result in a lowered self-concept, causing the individual to avoid job seeking, out of fear of rejection. Past experiences of not getting hired because of a prior conviction can prevent the individual from disclosing his criminal background. Later, the discovery of a criminal record could result in termination, based on a failure to disclose past offenses when completing the application.

While having certain types of offenses on their criminal records is an automatic disqualifier for some positions, correctional education programming is designed to provide job skills training and education in industries where past criminal convictions aren't a primary concern for a potential employer. Individuals who participated in either a vocational or educational program during incarceration were 13% higher to become employed upon release compared to those who did not participate (Davis et. al, 2013). Being able to leave prison, equipped with a tangible set of skills or education that can assist with successful reentry of released persons, is the primary goal of correctional rehabilitation programs. While reducing recidivism rates and producing employable citizens is ambitious, addressing self-stigmatization is necessary as it can impact the individual's self-concept, and the physical and mental well-being of the person.

Stigmatization of marginalized persons

Social stigma is defined as "negative attitudes and discrimination from community members" (Moore et al., 2016, p. 206). In his book *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity,* Canadian sociologist Irving Goffman presents stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" to an individual (Goffman, 1963, p. 13). He argues that individuals or groups with a stigmatized attribute are often excluded from full participation in society and they may internalize negative attitudes and stereotypes about themselves as a result. Stigmatized persons, such as former justice-involved individuals, may use various strategies to manage the negative perception of themselves by others, such as hiding their criminal records.

Goffman suggests the existence of three different stigmas. First, there are "abominations of the body", including those who suffer from physical irregularities (Goffman, 1963, p. 14). The term is used to describe deformities that are considered to be morally or socially unacceptable. In some religious contexts, it describes actions or behaviors that are considered sinful or morally corrupt and places negative judgement on certain physical characteristics or behaviors.

The "tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion" consists of those traits that can be "passed through lineage and equally contaminate all members of a family" (Goffman, 1963, p. 14). The phrase refers to the negative stereotypes and prejudices that are directed towards certain groups of people based on their race, nationality, or religion. Stigmas can be used to marginalize individuals in these groups, and can result in significant harm to individuals and communities. Tribal stigmas are often used to justify violence, racism, and discrimination, create social and economic inequalities, and to restrict the human

rights of certain people. Biases can create an us versus them mentality, which in turn can lead to conflicts.

Lastly, persons with "blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions… or dishonesty" may be viewed as undesirable by mainstream society because of mental disorder, addiction, radical political beliefs, or criminal histories (Goffman, 1963, p. 14). Perceived differences about a group can cause stigmatized persons to be seen as sub-human. Someone who suffers from mental illness may be seen as odd, unpredictable, or irrational. Other members of society may not trust them and avoid interaction with persons suffering from mental health conditions altogether.

Ex-offenders may be viewed as dangerous, untrustworthy, or overly aggressive as a result of their previous incarcerations. Sexual offenders are a particularly stigmatized subsection of this group, as their unnatural behaviors are deemed to be abnormal and perverted. These judgments and perceptions are often based on stereotypes and prejudices, and not on fact. Being dehumanized and mistreated, because of one's past incarceration, can sabotage an individual's successful re-entry into the community. Goffman theorizes the stigmatized person is likely to be aware he is different and expects to be treated differently. In response, he may internalize feelings of negative self-worth and rejection from mainstream society, resulting in depression and anxiety. The individual is likely to withdraw from his family and the community, blocking him from opportunities and an ability to engage in a fulfilling life. According to Goffman (1963), those with criminal histories manage the effects of stigma using one of two approaches. Some acknowledge their misdeeds and are forthcoming about past incarceration, while

others hide prior offenses altogether to avoid being treated as outcasts (Copenhaver et al., 2007).

Obtaining an education can provide a sense of accomplishment and validation for the individual, which can help to counteract feelings of shame and low self-worth associated with his criminal past. Hlavka et. al (2015) examined the reentry experiences of previously incarcerated individuals. Among the findings were that participants had difficulty obtaining employment and housing. Participants experienced feelings of stigmatization relating to their past criminal records.

Carceral Impact on Families

The physical and emotional separation experienced by imprisoned persons and their loved ones lends support to the theory "Incarceration is a family experience" (McKay et al., 2018, p. 96). The consequences of prison are long-term and adversely affect the partners and children of justice-involved individuals. The longer the sentence being served, the more likely committed relationships will deteriorate. In 2018, four percent of the population or 2.6 million children had at least one parent in custody (Turney & Goodsell, 2018). The absence of a parent can negatively affect the stability, finances, educational outcomes, emotional well-being of household members.

Children with parents behind bars are more susceptible to poverty than those without an incarcerated parent (Turney & Goodsell, 2018; McKay et al., 2018). Losing a working parent can financially devastate a family as the remaining household members assume responsibility for any debts that are owed. Prior to incarceration, justice-involved individuals provided at least fifty percent of the household's incomes (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). Single parents often seek secondary employment to provide for their

children, leaving them in the care of others or, depending on the child's age, unsupervised at home. The absence of adequate supervision creates vulnerability to delinquency and truancy, as a child's role models become older teens and adults in the neighborhood. Adolescents are easily manipulated into participating in criminal activities, which can result in juvenile delinquency at an early age.

In households where meeting the basic needs is a struggle, education is not always a priority. Parents with low educational achievement are less likely to recognize the importance of their children's academic success than in homes where parents are highly educated (Martinez et al., 2022; Pinquart & Ebeling, 2020; Spera et al., 2009). Even when education is valued, many parents lack the experience to guide and support their children. Parental involvement with teachers and schools may be limited or nonexistent in single-parent homes where economic hardships exist. Learning disabilities are often overlooked, resulting in frustration and poor academic performance. Low educational attainment is common among minority families and is reflective in the prison population. The lack of parental educational achievement is often passed down to children, in much the same fashion as substance misuse or abuse.

The emotional toll imprisonment has on female partners and the psychological affect it has on children can be detrimental, as the absence of an incarcerated individual can exacerbate any previously strained conditions experienced in the household.

According to the National Institute of Corrections (2022), 40% of state inmates resided with their children prior to incarceration. The extended lack of contact and emotional barriers created by confinement can cause psychological difficulties in children who may already be vulnerable as a result of other circumstances. They often

struggle with anxiety and depression at an increasingly alarming rate compared to children whose parents are not in prison.

Adolescence is a critical time in a young person's life where self-identity is developed through personal growth and experiences (Spera et al., 2009). It is common for adolescents to experiment with alcohol or drugs during his or her teen years. In situations where incarcerated persons have substance abuse disorders, there is an increased risk of passing along the trait to their child (Davis & Shlafer, 2017). Children imitate the behaviors of the adults in their lives. Modeling of behavior occurs, even when it is illegal or inappropriate by community standards. Besides adversely affecting children in terms of substance abuse disorders and poor educational outcomes, incarceration places children at a greater risk for mental health disorders.

Research studies have linked negative self-image, depression, and antisocial behavior to parental incarceration (Brookes & Baille, 2011). Not only are children traumatized from exposure to the events leading up to the incarceration, but they suffer when a parent is absent from the home. Children are not always told the truth about the whereabouts of the incarcerated parent and may experience anxiety and depression from feeling abandoned. some struggle with trying to escape from the stigma attached to having a parent in prison (Murray & Murray, 2010).

Psychological Effects of Incarceration

People who are discriminated against as a result of social, cultural, economic, and political marginalization are more likely to experience inaccessibility to mental health care than individuals in other groups (*Mental Health Facts for Diverse Populations*, 2016). Prisoners are a subset of marginalized groups, in part, due to their high rates of

mental illness and disorders. The psychological effects of incarceration are long term and can be detrimental to ethnic minorities and those with pre-existing mental health conditions. It is widely accepted in social science research that African American and Latino males are overrepresented in the criminal justice system compared to White males. Although 13% of the total U.S. population consists of African American males, they make up 40% of the total prison population (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018). Young men between the ages of 20 and 34 are at higher risk of incarceration, compared to other age groups. Approximately 1.6% of White males, 3.9% of Latino males, and 9.1% of African American males were imprisoned at the end of 2015 (Pettit & Gutierrez, 2018). Of the total U.S. population, one in 17 White males can expect to be incarcerated compared to 1 in 3 African American males (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018).

The oppressive environment of prison can have a negative impact on any incarcerated person. Individuals with mental disorders are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Half of prison inmates are found to have a psychiatric disorder and 15-20% have a serious mental illness (Al-Rousan et. al, 2017; Bark, 2014). Incarceration can exacerbate mental health conditions and substance abuse disorders. Persons with psychological disorders are unlikely to receive a proper diagnosis or adequate treatment during incarceration due to limited psychological and mental health treatment services. One research study examined how soon after first entering a correctional facility an inmate received a substance abuse or mental health disorder diagnosis. The average time a substance abuse disorder was discovered was 11 months, while inmates averaged receiving diagnoses of anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder within 21-29 months (Al-Rousan et. al, 2017).

Human beings need social interaction to sustain good mental health and well-being. Isolation, which is commonly utilized as a disciplinary tool in penal institutions, can worsen existing mental health conditions. Inmates who are placed in long term segregation often experience hallucinations and paranoia (Clark, 2018).

Prison overcrowding is not only problematic in the United States, but in countries throughout the world. Correctional facilities are expensive to operate. As a result, many are overpopulated, underfunded, and understaffed. Dormitory housing of inmates is used as a cost-effective way to place more people in less space. As an added benefit, the setup requires fewer correctional officers to supervise more inmates. The undesirable effect of dormitories is that warehousing people together, particularly those who have violent tendencies, mental illness, and addiction issues, can be damaging to one's mental health. Confining individuals to small spaces where they have no privacy is likely to negatively impact their mental well-being (Macdonald, 2018; Walker et. al, 2014). Understaffed facilities are often times, unable to provide adequate supervision, which places every inmate at a risk of harm. When state budgets are tight, resources for treatment programs are scarce, which reduces the likelihood incarcerated persons will receive the appropriate psychological services.

Prisoner Reentry

According to Collier (2014), the United States incarcerates more people than any other country, even though it makes up only 5% of the world's population. A report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics revealed the staggering number of inmates confined in state and federal correctional institutions to be 1,489,363 or approximately 440 offenders per 100,000 U.S. residents (Bronson & Carson, 2019). "One in thirty-one American

adults is on probation, on parole, or in prison or jail on any given day" (Harris & Harding, 2019, p. 224). Of those held in confinement, approximately 600,000 individuals will be released into their communities within the United States each year (Petrich et al., 2022).

While they are incarcerated, justice-involved individuals are limited to decision-making for themselves, particularly related to the programming they receive. Often times, a plan is designed by classifications staff, based on court sanctions imposed during sentencing and an assessment the prisoner receives upon arriving at the correctional facility. Prisons are tasked with managing large groups of people, which relegates decisions made on behalf of the individual's needs (Taxman, 2004). Instead, reentry programs are designed with a "one size fits all" approach and do not always meet the specific needs of

It is critical to prepare prisoners for successful reentry into the community. Educational programs are an essential component of reentry preparedness for offenders as they provide the necessary skills and knowledge to be employable in the current workforce.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What are the experiences of previously incarcerated men regarding self-stigmatization when seeking employment?

RQ 2: What are the experiences of previously incarcerated men regarding self-stigmatization when reconnecting with family?

RQ 3: What are the perspectives of previously incarcerated postsecondary graduates about their futures since being released?

RQ 4: What role does education play in mediating feelings of self-stigmatization among formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in a postsecondary correctional education program?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Strategies of Inquiry

The proposed qualitative study intends to employ a narrative approach, involving a small number of participants. The researcher will engage participants who have participated in a postsecondary correctional education program while incarcerated, in structured interviews, consisting of open-ended questions. Employing open-ended questioning helps to avoid responses of yes or no and instead, encourages the interviewee to elaborate in his answers. The appeal of a narrative approach in qualitative research is that it allows participants to share their life experiences without restriction, providing insight to information the researcher has no firsthand experience with, but can only read about. The incarceration experience, specifically how obtaining a college degree while in prison impacts a previously incarcerated person's self-stigmatization, is limited to a small percentage of former justice-involved individuals, compared to the total number of persons imprisoned in the United States.

Participants

The researcher intends to recruit a purposive sample of N = 10 formerly incarcerated men who graduated from a postsecondary correctional education program in Florida to participate in exploratory interviews to assess how education has impacted their feelings of self-stigmatization since being released. The intended number of participants to be interviewed is 10 or until saturation is met.

The college program where the researcher is employed partners with the Florida Department of Corrections to offer PSCEPs. It maintains records on students who graduated from PSCEPs, to include home and email addresses. The researcher will

identify potential participants and send recruitment packets containing information about the proposed research study via mail or email to each individual. The letter will include the researcher's contact information and instruct graduates who are interested in participating in the study to reach out to the researcher. Upon receiving participation interest from 10 graduates, the researcher will contact them to schedule a date and time to conduct an interview. It is anticipated not all of the first 10 to reply may be willing or able to participate in an interview, due to personal and employment time constraints. Maintaining a list of potential interviewees in the order they contact the researcher will provide for a few backup participants, in the event the first to respond aren't available and to meet the desired number of 10 interviews for the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Participants, due to their geographical locations throughout the state of Florida, will be interviewed via the Zoom conferencing platform online. Interviews are anticipated to last between 45 min and 1 hr. The researcher will utilize an interview protocol to ensure consistency. It is expected some respondents will share more information about their life experiences than others, which will extend their interview time. All participants will be asked the same questions, although the semi-structured nature of the interviews means the researcher will ask occasional follow-up questions when pertinent. All interviews will be video/audio recorded through the Zoom platform, with a digital recorder being used as a backup, and then transcribed. Prior to recruitment of participants and conducting interviews, the study will be approved by the institutional review board.

Instrument

The researcher intends to use qualitative interviewing since this methodology encourages participants to present their personal experiences in detail. Interviewing will be conducted using a questionnaire, identified as Appendix A, previously used in another study. Permission from the primary researcher was obtained to use the questionnaire from the prior study (Evans et. al, 2017). Approval from the primary researcher was also granted to modify any questions, to further expand on research related to self-stigmatization of postsecondary correctional program participants. The questionnaire includes inquiries about participants' personal backgrounds, family, reentry, and outlook on the future. Questions are designed to evoke responses about the individual's self-stigmatization prior to, during, and post-educational correctional programming.

In the background category, the question "What was your education level prior to incarceration (first sentence)?" will be asked. Knowing the participant's prior education level provides a baseline as to his educational achievement upon first entering a correctional facility. Having this information is important as a majority of individuals arrive to prison without a high school diploma or GED. In Florida, incarcerated persons with educational deficiencies are required to complete 150 hours of Adult Basic Education and pass an equivalency test during their sentences (Florida Legislature, 2022).

The question "What immediate effects did participation have on your privileges/activities/status/respect?" provides insight as to how the individual perceived himself prior to and upon entering the PSCEP. Incarcerated individuals are expected to comply with the restrictive policies and procedures of the Florida Department of

Corrections. Certain items cannot be kept by confined persons, specifically those which cannot be purchased in the canteen, as they are considered to be contraband (Florida Administrative Code, 2021). Inmates found with contraband in their possession are subject to disciplinary punishment. For PSCEP students, certain items, such as highlighter pens and spiral bound notebooks would be listed on an inventory sheet and would be approved for educational purposes. Inmates not enrolled in the same PSCEP and found in possession of those items would be subject to punitive action for violating the inmate orientation handbook (Florida Department of Corrections, 2018). "What does your family think of you since graduating from the program?" is important to ask as it relates to a justice-involved individual's self-stigmatization regarding his family. Incarcerated individuals often experience a low self-concept as a result of perceived past failures in their roles of son, spouse, brother, and father. Re-establishing strong connections with family is often a lengthy, difficult process. Completing a postsecondary degree, for persons who entered prison with educational deficiencies, is a huge accomplishment. For some individuals, setting goals and achieving them for the first time, shows their families they are serious about making positive changes.

When asking interviewees to "Describe your self-confidence before you started the education program. How has it changed since finishing the program?", the intent is to determine if participants' self-esteem decreased, remained the same, or increased as a result of obtaining their postsecondary degrees. These questions specifically address the suggestion that education is a tool that can increase the self-concepts of previously incarcerated persons.

Because past research has focused primarily on recidivism rates and employability as indicators of PSCEP success, asking how education has helped participants become gainfully employed will offer additional evidence supporting or denying results of previous studies. Questions in the *Outlook on the future* category are critical to understanding any impact education had on the mindset of the program participant. “Looking back on your life before incarceration, what were your future plans?” and “What are your goals for the future?” will provide insight as to participant’s thoughts about his future before entering prison and if his perspectives about life have changed. Each of the inquiries contained within the questionnaire categories are designed to collect data to further understand the impact of education on program participants’ self-stigmatization. A copy of the questionnaire is included as Appendix A in the research study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis will begin during transcription of the interviews and continue throughout data coding. The researcher will evaluate the data collected and group similar topics together. An inductive coding method will be used to create abbreviated names for the topics, as the information to be revealed during the interview process is unknown. The researcher will examine the topics to identify any patterns that may emerge among interviewee responses. Interview questions are designed to elicit responses from participants, based on their lived experiences and perspectives. Any identifying themes will be color-coded by value, according to consistent patterns established among participant replies to questions. All data will be assembled and hand-entered into a qualitative computer software program, to conduct an analysis of the data collected. The

identity of participants will be protected, as pseudonyms will be used in the reporting process. Collected data will be stored for at least 5 years (Creswell, 2014).

Limitations

Potential threats to the internal and external validity of the study are much the same as with any qualitative research. The biggest threat to external validity is related to generalizations and whether the respondent group represents the identified population (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). In order to limit threats to external validity, all participants are males who graduated from a local postsecondary correctional education program in Florida. Responses would likely be more diverse if the perspectives of females were included, but accessibility to female PSCEP graduates would be difficult as there are no female correctional facilities in close proximity to the researcher. Responses will be based on the individual's experiences and depict his personal biases and perceptions.

Potential threats to validity include honesty of responses and whether the participant will answer every question and reply truthfully, which is out of the researcher's control. Each participant in the sample has been released from prison within the last 5 years. A longer duration following release may provide greater insight into the experiences with and thoughts about self-stigmatization. An additional limitation is the sample size of 10 might be considered small. However, for exploratory research the sample size can possibly produce enough information to reach saturation, which indicates that no new themes would likely emerge from any further interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Chapter 4: Findings

General Overview

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated men who had graduated from a Postsecondary Correctional Education Program (PSCEP) in Florida. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ 1: What are the experiences of previously incarcerated men regarding self-stigmatization when seeking employment?

RQ 2: What are the experiences of previously incarcerated men regarding self-stigmatization when reconnecting with family?

RQ 3: What are the perspectives of previously incarcerated postsecondary graduates about their futures since being released?

RQ 4: What role does education play in mediating feelings of self-stigmatization among formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in a postsecondary correctional education program?

Participant Profiles

The ten individuals who participated in this study are formerly incarcerated persons who participated in a Postsecondary Correctional Education Program (PSCEP). In order to preserve confidentiality, each was given a pseudonym. Of the ten participants, the average age was 40 years old. The length of their most recent incarceration ranged from 43 months to 240 months. Prior to entering prison on their first sentence, 2 participants had education levels less than a GED/High School Diploma, 4 had High School Diplomas, and 4 had High School Diplomas with some college. Participants'

(combined) academic achievements were: 8 College Credit Certificates, 5 Associate in Arts degrees, 5 Associate in Science degrees, and 7 Bachelor degrees.

Data Collection

After receiving permission to conduct participant interviews from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board, recruitment packets containing an invitation letter to participate in the study, consent form, and a self-addressed stamped envelope were sent via mail or email to twenty-one formerly incarcerated men who had been students in a PSCEP. Of those, ten agreed to participate and were contacted by the researcher to schedule an interview. Interviews were conducted using the Zoom meeting platform for six participants. Three participants were interviewed telephonically and one participant was interviewed in-person due to Zoom inaccessibility. At the beginning of each interview, individuals were thanked for their willingness to participate and told they could decline to answer any question(s) and could conclude the interview at any time. All interviews were audio/video recorded via Zoom and/or audio recorded using digital recorder, as a backup. Questions from the Participant Interview Questionnaire, designated as Appendix A, were asked. Interviews lasted between 31 and 91 minutes, with an average of 40 minutes. Zoom meeting platform software provided a transcription of each interview. The researcher exported interview transcription into separate Word documents and verified each for its correctness. While the Zoom transcription service captured the majority of words in each recording, the researcher made spelling and grammar corrections to construct each in-depth interview verbatim, including pause words like “uh” or “um”. The researcher did a second review of each transcription, to verify its

accuracy. Upon completion of transcription, recordings were deleted from the Zoom online cloud and securely stored, according to IRB approved processes.

Data Analysis

The deductive analysis process used in this study was to identify any themes or patterns emerging from participant interviews. The initial stage of the analytic process was to become familiar with the data collected. Familiarization with the data was completed during transcription and accuracy verification. Certain questions from the interviews were noted as aligning to the research questions. A line-by-line analysis of all participant comments was conducted to identify similar themes significant to the research questions. The researcher highlighted similar themes and placed them into separate categories. Participant comments to each of the questions were uploaded into Atlas.ti qualitative software program. The researcher entered code words significant to the research questions into the program. The primary weakness of only using codes or word identification is it identifies use of the word and does not provide meaning as to its significance to the research questions. Analysis of the data and interpretation of how the data relates to the research questions is the responsibility of the researcher. The program was used as a coding tool as it searched and identified the data for words and phrases containing the inputted codes. When the coding process was complete, the program highlighted quotations from participant responses that corresponded to the specific codes. During the coding process, patterns began to emerge from the textual data. The researcher closely analyzed the patterns and organized them into groups, according to content.

Presentation of Findings

After the open coding process was completed, a total of 13 sub-themes were identified and categorized into four primary themes: Employment Opportunities, Family Support, Future Goals, and Impact of Incarceration. See Table 1.

Table
Themes, Sub-themes, and Codes

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
Employment Opportunities	Preparedness Motivation Confidence	EO-P EO-M EO-C
Family Support	Strengthened Bonds Pride Respect	FS-SB FS-P FS-R
Future Goals	Career Development Education Finances Personal	FG-CD FG-E FG-F FG-P
Impact of Incarceration	Positive Outcomes Negative Outcomes Mixed Outcomes	II-PO II-NO II-MO

Research Question 1 Theme: Employment Opportunities

As formerly incarcerated persons reenter society, they face the difficult challenge of becoming gainfully employed. Individuals who serve time in prison bear the burden of having a criminal record, which consequentially disqualifies them from holding particular positions where licensures are required (Davis et. al, 2013). As they have been isolated from mainstream society, the workforce changes. Prior to incarceration, many have experienced unstable work histories or lack the training and education necessary to qualify for jobs other than those paying minimum wage. In order to gain insight into the

process these individuals go through, an examination to determine "What are the experiences of previously incarcerated men regarding self-stigmatization when seeking employment?" began by asking participants what kinds of jobs they had prior to incarceration. The majority of responses included retail, restaurants, construction, being self-employed or working in family businesses. Most participants described their work histories as having a multitude of jobs that were entry-level and low-paying, with consistent gaps in employment.

"Tim" described his past job history as being limited, stating *"*Restaurants. I didn't work that much, honestly."

When speaking about his prior work experience, "Will" admitted his previous jobs were in different industries, saying "I had dozens of jobs before being incarcerated. I worked in retail, in maintenance, worked at hotels. Worked at, just a variety of pretty much low-paying jobs."

Wayne explained his work experience prior to entering prison as also being limited, saying "I had only worked in restaurants prior to incarceration."

When describing his past employment and perspective about the jobs he had, "Mike" reported having a scattered work history and admitted his lack of interest in pursuing a career:

> Just basic jobs, really easy, low-skilled stuff that I could grab a paycheck out of for a couple of weeks and then drop without having any real concerns about. I sold a lot of drugs and that's how I paid for my lifestyle for the most part. But, you know, that's not sustainable and it's sure not what I want to do now.

Preparedness

Formerly incarcerated individuals who enter prison with less than a high school diploma and are released with only a GED, are often ill-prepared to navigate the employment process. Those who have served lengthy sentences may be unfamiliar with applying for jobs online or how to create a resumé. Because of these obstacles, securing stable employment is especially difficult and can potentially sabotage one's successful reintegration. The majority of participants in the study who obtained their Associate in Science and Bachelor degrees are working in industries such as water/wastewater treatment systems, irrigation and maintenance, technology, and in construction. When asked about the jobs they had since their release and if education had helped, participants explained how having a degree prepared them to seek out employment.

"Joe" described the turning point upon realizing the usefulness of what he learned in college as:

> One of the most relevant reflections I was having was when I actually went and applied for the job where I am currently working. I did my cover letter and I did my resume'. And so, when I started all this is when the first thought came to mind, like I remember doing this in college. I need to start applying some of my understanding.

"Tim" explained how having an education to include in a resume' or on a job application assisted in the job seeking process as "When you go apply for a job and you have a Bachelor's degree under your resume' or application, that shows a level of competence that you have. It helps show your level of intelligence, that you're at least, capable.

"Noah" described the impact of a degree on the employment process, saying "It's certainly helped me get interviews and jobs, having it (a college degree) on the resume."

Some participants' responses included that having an education gave them the confidence and willingness to seek out employment opportunities they might not have, otherwise. Through their educational experiences, they became familiar with the application process and believed they had the skillsets to communicate effectively to a potential employer, in writing, and in-person, through interviews. Individuals in the study shared their experiences with the job search process and how prospective employers evaluated them as applicants with degrees.

"Wayne" described his experience when applying for positions, even when he didn't meet the qualifications:

> The lady that was helping us with our interview skills told us, you know, even if you don't meet the requirements for the job, fire an application out anyway. I didn't meet the requirements for this job and I got it within weeks of applying. So, it (the education) just really helped me see that the sky's the limit, if you are willing to apply yourself.

"Mike" commented about having a degree and how it directly impacted the process when he applied for a management position as "I supervise three other people and it's cool...Oh, I wouldn't have gotten the job without my degree. Plain and simple. I would not have been considered for the position."

"Gus" relayed his experience when getting hired for a position that did not require a college degree:

> I got paid more on the hour with a degree that has nothing to do it (the job), because I'm teachable. They didn't even ask me what my degree was in. That's the difference between having a college education or not having one – filling out an application and turning in a resume.

Motivation

Studies have examined the motivation of incarcerated persons who participate in correctional educational programming. According to Panitsides & Moussiou (2019), mentally escaping from the prison environment, doing something constructive with their time, and 'learning for the sake of learning' were among the top three factors prompting individuals electing to enroll in correctional education. In an earlier study, findings by Schlesinger (2005) were that incarcerated persons participated in education programs because of educational deficiencies and how getting an education was critical to successful reentry into the community. In this research study, participants were asked why they started the correctional education program and their reasons aligned with results from previous studies.

"Joe" described how he initially obtained his GED and then, enrolled in correspondence courses as a distraction from the prison environment. Once he saw how his achievements impacted his family, his confidence grew and he continued to move forward:

> It became a form of mental escape. When I first got incarcerated, I went for the GED program. Earned it. Seeing the reaction through my mother and sisters, with me achieving that. And that became a form of connection that I made that I tried to continue through vocation and educational

> trades. And then, through my successes in that, it built up enough confidence in me to believe that I could go for a degree. I kinda always wanted to when I was doing the GED studies and passing it, but I never felt like I had that, like it wasn't in me to achieve that enough to where I felt like I could do it. You know, it always felt like it was a higher plain than what I could reach, in a sense. But I had the dream of wanting to, you know, and then I just took one or two courses through correspondence. Did well and worked on it. And this started one step after the other and eventually, the program became open to individuals and I applied to get into it.

"Wayne" had envisioned higher education prior to his incarceration and when the opportunity to obtain his degree presented itself, he viewed it as a way to make good use of his time in prison:

> Well, you know, it had always been my goal to get a Bachelor's degree. I just felt like it was always the best course of action for me, um, and I didn't want to let my incarceration hold me back. I wanted to make the (most) good out of the situation as I could. So, I felt like the correctional education program would help me achieve those goals. Help me spend this time wisely.

"Noah" viewed being housed in a program dorm as better and was glad to be doing something constructive with his time in prison:

> It was like this shining beam of light to intercept me from going to a regular dorm, to coming to a program dorm, that in my mind, would have

> better amenities. But then it's also being able to use the time productively to get the degree and do something, that ultimately, I had messed up previously and yeah, I mean, it seemed too good to be true. So, I was really excited to go try it out.

"Gus" realized obtaining a degree would increase opportunities for him to reenter society upon release and explained he enrolled in the correctional education program "So I could become more prosperous in society."

"André" wanted to prepare himself for life after incarceration and knew getting an education before being released would allow him to concentrate on the other aspects of reintegration:

> I was interested in leaving prison with something for myself. I was mainly just trying to think of ways that I could maybe put myself in a better position when I get out and not have to worry about you know, um. I could focus more on getting my life together. Put it like that.

The researcher's role of liaison to a PSCEP gave insight to the process of recruitment for Postsecondary Correctional Education programs. In Florida, the process typically begins months in advance of program start dates, due to the lengthy admissions and testing processes required to admit college students. Once a college agrees to partner with corrections to offer a program, recruitment is initiated through classification officers at prisons throughout the state. In their responses to the question "Why did you start the education program?", half of participants reported they were recruited by prison staff while the other half initiated their own participation in the program. According to the Florida Department of Management Services (n.d.), the job description of classification

officer is “professional work assessing, counseling and/or classifying inmates”, requires a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university and duties include “counseling and referring inmates to treatment and program services”. A classification officer bears the responsibility of “planning and coordinating treatment and betterment programs” (Florida Department of Management Services, n.d.). The researcher found it particularly curious that prison staff-initiated recruitment equaled incarcerated persons initiating their own participation into PSCEPs as it was expected classification staff would be the primary source of recruitment for rehabilitative programs.

“David” described how he learned about the opportunity, saying “I was a candidate that qualified for the program at that time. A classification officer came to me, prior to me getting my GED, and asked if I wanted to go to this college program?”. “Mike” said the chance to go to college was more appealing than the job he was assigned to when he found out about the program:

> I thought it sounded a lot more interesting than road work. They had me in a road camp. And that just didn't seem like the direction that God wanted my life to go in. A gentleman that I had never seen before pulled me out of line at the hospital and asked me if I wanted to go to college. I said absolutely, because it beat the heck out of being at the prison that's for sure.

“Noah” described how he was notified about the program by a staff member upon first arriving to prison after sentencing “It was funny, really. When it got presented to me initially, I had like just gotten to DOC after getting sentenced in the county jail.”

Confidence

According to Evans et. al (2017), those serving time in prison often experience diminished self-esteem as a result of the stigma associated with criminal behavior. An individual who sees himself in a negative light is likely to withdraw from social interactions and may be unwilling to pursue opportunities shared by other members of society. Reduced self-confidence can adversely impact a formerly incarcerated person's successful reentry into the community.

"Joe" compared the differences between past jobs in restaurants to the wastewater treatment systems work he does now, stating "The level of responsibility for what I do now and what I had done before in the past are two totally different things. Certainly, education has contributed to that."

"David" explained his experience at a recent job interview and how having a degree impacted the way he views himself:

> Right now, I'm in a process of receiving a job as a waste water technician. And when I got interviewed for the job, my education set the standards high that even the guy who was hiring said, you got more credentials than I have and he's a supervisor. So that was like joy to my heart, hearing that in the interview and therefore, education definitely has put me in positioning where I can be confident.

"André" described how his self-confidence has increased since graduating from the correctional education program and being released:

> Since I left the education program, I see value in myself. You know, I'm proud of my accomplishments and I'm proud of my drive. So, I wanna

> keep moving forward, you know. It's just exciting to see my family, you know, just. It's like they're just so happy about everything I do and [that] I get done. So, it's a good thing just to see that and that kind of motivates me, you know. I'm already self-motivated, but now I have the help of seeing the reaction of my aunts and my uncles, you know. So that really helps and that really gave me a measure of self-confidence and self-worth, just value overall.

Research Question 2 Theme: Family Support

Self-stigmatization often occurs when a person experiences feelings of low self-worth. In response, the individual may isolate himself from family and friends, to avoid or manage negative feelings. Incarceration often takes a toll on families, as a loved one's physical absence and limited communication can sever relationships, many of which are already strained. Questions asked of the participants were designed to not only measure their relationships with family, but also, with former friends and classmates from their PSCEPs.

To determine "What are the experiences of previously incarcerated men regarding self-stigmatization when reconnecting with family?", a series of questions about familial relationships was presented to participants. During interviews, most participants mentioned how the time away from their families strained those relationships. Some, despite being in the seemingly oppressive environment of prison, discussed how having family support encouraged them to pursue their educational goals.

Strengthened Bonds

The toll a prison sentence takes on families can be long-term and are especially difficult to mend (McKay et. al, 2018). Time, distance, and the absence of the incarcerated person, particularly during lengthier sentences, can result in permanently severed family relationships. “Joe” described the impact of extended time away from his family:

> So, we’re not only distance apart from each other, but we’re also distant from each other in our connection with one another and it’s because the Department [of Corrections] makes it so difficult to be able to retain that connection. And it’s gotten better over time, but when I first was incarcerated, you know, it could cost eight, $6-$8 dollars for a two-minute phone call. And those add up. You can always write each other, but It’s not always the same. You'll [not] get the same connection you did when you hear a voice or we can reach out and hug and have that contact. Um, over the years, the separation has increased some. They’ve always been there for me but there is an element of feeling distant from them. And I’m sure they also feel the same as their lives have grown. And they’ve progressed and their children, growing up. They’re having the marriage and living their own lives. And me also, in some form, growing up myself and being distant from the family events and things we would’ve [done] if I had been out there.

“Noah” discussed how setting a goal to better himself and completing it was a way to prove to his family he was serious about implementing real life change:

> Definitely strengthened it. I mean, they, I think that it was a good way for me to show them from inside of prison that I was, in fact, trying to take steps forward to better myself and make right and not continue. Because like I said, that I'd been arrested previously. And so, you know, everybody was like, oh well, is he just gonna keep doing this forever? And so, getting into the program and doing all that and finishing the program, certainly when... a whole bunch of people didn't. I love that. They love that. We love that. And it's been a very strong cohesive bond because of that. I think it's really showed them that I'm trying to do the right thing I think, so.

"Will" appreciates the strong family connections that were present before and continued throughout his incarceration, saying "Yeah, my relationship with my family has been great and has always been. They're my biggest cheerleaders now. I just thank God for such a wonderful support system."

"André" also had a strong family support system during his incarceration and described how relationships with his family changed after he became a college graduate:

> My family, they've always been very supportive. Before, they did kinda treated me like a kid, but now that I have an education, you can tell they have a measure of respect for that part of it. When it comes to certain things, when I'm trying to explain something to them, they listen and that's really cool to see that.

"Anthony" explained how getting a degree during incarceration and returning to college after being released has impacted relationships with family:

> I've always had a good standing with my family. Whereas before, I wouldn't take the time to go see them as often. I was always really busy. I'll say I'm a little bit more family-oriented now. We talk about education more than prior. They're a little bit involved, asking what I am doing. We talk about different types of assignments. One of my siblings is trying to pass a licensure exam to be able to go into private practice. My family has verbalized the fact they are proud. They're just really happy that I was able to do something with my time.

Pride

Marginalized persons, particularly those with criminal histories, are susceptible to losing social status, withing mainstream society and their families, following a criminal conviction (Evans et. al, 2017). This loss can often result in internalized self-stigmatization that manifests itself in feelings of low self-worth and shame. In an attempt to mediate those negative feelings, some formerly incarcerated persons avoid social situations and isolate themselves from family and friends. In past research, education has served as a moderator to self-stigmatization (Evans et. al, 2017).

Each participant was asked "What does your family think of you since you graduated from the program?" They shared their families' responses and how getting a degree impacted not only themselves, but other family members.

"Andre'" described his experience of graduating from college while incarcerated and being released after a lengthy sentence as monumental in bringing his immediate and extended family together:

> Oh, my family are ecstatic. They're so proud. Ever since my grandparents died, the family hasn't been together as a whole. About two weeks ago, the whole family came to the house and it was just amazing. We got a group picture. my family is very proud of me and my goal is to continue to make them proud and to make something of myself, and hopefully, be in a position to kind of you know, to be a pillar of support like they were from me for so long.

"David", who was recently released and is currently living away from family explained their reaction to his achievements:

> They have my degree on the wall. I've been communicating with them a lot. They're very proud of me. I think it encouraged them – my children. It shows them that despite the obstacles, despite the odds, despite my past, there's still hope if you don't give up. Seeing their dad didn't give up, that dad's still thriving, I think that communicated a whole lot of trust between me and my children and my family.

"Joe" described the effect getting an education had on his family, particularly on his younger siblings:

> They think a lot about me. They're really happy. I think with me, going for another degree has inspired my siblings to get theirs. I feel like I've inspired that within them. Being able to focus on my schooling so much when I was in the program, helped me to maintain a higher level in my GPA. And them seeing that, seeing that I'm making the President's List and graduating with honors, they feel inspired by it.

Respect

Graduating from college impacted the trust and respect between formerly incarcerated persons and their families in different ways. Participants shared their individual experiences, which included previously having had none to a renewed sense of respect since completing their degrees. “Noah” shared how incarceration, despite some negative aspects, allowed him to reconnect with family and how getting his degree impacted them:

> My relationship with my parents was completed and totally dead because of my drug addiction. When I was in prison, I was going to school and we were talking more. Now, the relationship is probably better than it’s ever been. When I told my mom about the opportunity to get my Bachelor’s degree, she was speechless, over-the-moon, super-excited. They were all supportive and happy about it too. And so overall, it’s been very positive.

“Wayne” described how getting an education increased the respect of his family:

> Oh, I’ve gained more respect with my family, for sure. You know, like I said before, when you get that, I feel like, when you obtain that degree, it just shows that, you know, you’re educated and you’re diligent and responsible enough to pursue something and see it through to its finish. I definitely feel like I’ve gained a little respect from my family for completing that.

“Mike” explained that having a lengthy criminal lifestyle resulted in a loss of respect by his family, but he’s working to repair those broken relationships:

> Well, I mean, I have a little bit (respect) now. But that wasn't necessarily so much my education as my past behavior had painted some relationships. And now that I'm not such a scumbag, there seems to be some healing, so we're hopeful.

"Gus" discussed how despite already having the support of his family, getting his degree reinforced their bond, saying "We've always had trust and respect. Um, they probably have a little more confidence in me as well, you know, what I was able to show them what I can accomplish when I put my mind to it."

The questions "Describe your social circles. How have they changed from before your incarceration to now?" and "How do you feel about former friends?" were asked to assess if participants had made new friends or if they rekindled friendships with people from their pasts. Some participants claimed the passage of time, particularly with lengthy incarcerations, had severed ties with friends while others recognized significant changes to who they hang out with now were necessary to avoid returning to prison.

"David" explained how he is cautious about who he lets into his circle now, saying:

> I've been making a lot of new friends in my fellowship, church environment. I can say I'm able to discern who's for me and who's not. I want the right people in my corner. It's been very up and down. I'm learning as I go, who to have around, who not [to have around].

"Noah" keeps a low social profile of a few friends, compared to before, stating "They're super, super small. Like, they're not a circle. They're just like little points on a map. I don't really hangout with anybody now."

"Will" described how he thought about making changes to who he associated with during his time in prison as:

> The one thing I realized in college [which was that], you kinda, I wouldn't go so far as to say you are who you surround yourself with, but who you surround yourself with has a great influence upon where you end up in life. But I try to surround myself with people who are like-minded in that they have a high goal, you know, they have a high standard for what they want out of life and they're working hard to get it, because I think that's the best way to move forward.

"Mike" explained how moving away from his hometown has allowed new, healthier friendships to form, saying:

> I live some distance away and don't talk to most of the people that I knew previously, at least as far as those circles go. I have a couple of really, really old friends that I know from my childhood that I talk to and I'm meeting new people here, in a sober circle. And it's a better quality of people. People that are professionals like myself as opposed to, you know, before – a bunch of other junkies doing junkie shit.

When asked about former friends, participants didn't speak negatively, but say they realize, because of the changes they've made post-release, they don't share much in common with old friends. "Anthony" has distanced himself from negative influences, saying "There's a lot of friends I've talked to. They may be doing some things I don't like and I just disassociate myself from them. It's not like I'm rude about it or anything like that, but I isolate myself from them."

"André" described people from his past as:

> My former friends are not bad people, you know. They just didn't have that measure of constraint. They didn't have a sense of responsibility. I was the same way. We know birds of a feather, flock together. I mean, we all had that sense of you could do what you want and everything's gonna be alright. No matter what, even if you hurt somebody's feelings or hurt someone's property. I see that's not the best way to think, because it leads to nothing.

"Joe" explained that despite some of his past friends' efforts to change their lives, the best choice for him was to move on from those relationships, stating:

> A few of them are trying. Have made various efforts to try to get away from that situation as well. And I try to pensively encourage that, but for the most part, I just keep away from that whole situation. It's just there's not a lot for me in that circle anymore. And having traveled in those circles, I know that the attempt to elevate someone that doesn't want to be elevated is futile. My situation isn't stable enough that I feel like I can really offer much assistance to anybody anyway. So, you know, I work on me and that might be selfish, but I mean, it is what it is.

Aside from questions about family and friends, incarcerated persons who had been part of a PSCEP were asked to "Discuss their relationships with classmates from the program. How often do you keep in touch? What do you communicate about?" These questions were designed to explore whether strong bonds of friendship were established through their participation in correctional education and if so, did they continue beyond

the walls of prison? The data revealed many participants were still communicating with their former classmates and they viewed having those supportive friendships as meaningful. “Anthony” keeps in touch with former classmates regularly, saying “I’ll say I communicate almost daily with them. I communicate more with them that I do anybody else. I’d say actively, every day, at least five of them. On a weekly basis, at least 12 to 15 of them.” When asked about how often he communicates with other students in the PSCEP, “Wayne” described the friendships he made during incarceration as:

> I’ve got a few classmates that I talk to very regularly, that I keep in touch with even more. I've got one that I talk to every day pretty much, and another one I talk to at least a few times a week. When you live 24/7 with somebody and you go to school with them, it's like you kind of forge a bond. Actually, when you go through the stuff you have to go through in that type of setting.

“Will” recognized how those friendships have been a source of positive support, stating “Yes, I do keep in touch with a few individuals and we all just try to encourage one another and just be each other’s cheerleader.” “Gus” is still in contact with some of his former classmates and explained how being in a program dormitory not only promotes academic study but helps build close friendships, stating:

> There's a couple of guys that I still talk to. We talk about the experience that we had in college, especially in the prison system. The ups and the downs. The goods and the bads. And the people we were in there with. But, a lot of those guys I’ll never see again. A couple of those guys are the ones that I've found friendship in. When you’re, when you’re in a dorm,

> I'll give [you], I'll give you a real quick explanation of what I'm talking about. A prison dorm is a revolving door. Constantly, people going in, constantly, people going out. But in a prison dorm for the college program, there is no coming in. They just leave. They don't come in, so you really get to know some of these guys.

It was expected that participants would give both positive and negative opinions about their experiences with other incarcerated persons while in the program. The researcher was intrigued that so many participants had such tight bonds with their PSCEP classmates and how those friendships added a layer of support that is critical to success, once a released person returns to the community.

Research Question 3 Theme: Future Goals

In an attempt to answer the question "What are the perspectives of previously incarcerated postsecondary graduates about their futures since being released?", participants were initially asked about any goals they had, prior to going to prison. They gave a variety of responses, ranging from having no plans to professional careers.

"David" explained how having no goals likely contributed to the negative outcome of incarceration:

> I didn't have none. I was just living from day to day, moment to moment, which is a bad state of mind. It didn't look well, period, and that's why I probably ended up incarcerated.

"André'" wanted to start his own business, but explained how he lacked the ability to take that first step, stating "I had no direction on what kind of business I wanted

to start. I just had to kind of find my own way to do it and I never honed in on anything. I was all over the place."

"Gus" described his plans to take over the family business:

> I basically quit school to go work with family and was working there when I got incarcerated. I went up to the eleventh grade, I did well in school. I played sports. I had friends who were going to college, but I wasn't doing that. People laugh about it now when they hear I got a degree. No one imagined I could.

"Mike" spoke about having no real plans, but only "More incarceration. Sell drugs until I get caught and then sit and do the time. Then, get out, sell some more drugs until I get caught. And rinse and repeat."

"Will" explained how, prior to incarceration, he had no motivation. Being in prison made him take a somber look at his life and he realized significant changes were needed:

> Prior to incarceration, I was a person without thought direction, without goals, and just really didn't have any drive or doing anything with my life. I didn't really see myself going anywhere prior to incarceration. While incarcerated, I came to a point where I knew that something needed to change in my life. Despite the current environment that I was in, I knew that I had to seek personal growth, and I took my time of incarceration as a journey of personal and professional and spiritual growth.

"Wayne" described the way he viewed himself before going to prison and how being incarcerated gave him time to evaluate his potential:

> I viewed myself pretty tragically, prior to incarceration. Especially after the incident occurred that caused me to become incarcerated. Prior to the incident, you know, I thought I was just a normal guy, going through normal issues. But then, when my incident occurred, I was just like, I was devastated and really, just wondering how I was going to be the success that I knew I was capable of being.

Career Development

Since graduating from the correctional education program, individuals participating in the study have thought about their goals regarding employment, money, education, and family. Those who are working in their desired career fields have plans to gain more knowledge so they can take on more responsibilities, gain valuable experience, and promote. Others are not sure what paths they will take, but are actively working to figure things out. By and large, the majority of participants in the study appeared hopeful about future opportunities created for them because of having achieved a college degree.

"Mike" has no plans to change careers but instead, wants to remain with his current employer:

> I'm hoping that these people are gonna give me a nice little raise so that I can start looking for a house. I like where I'm at now, so I'm hoping that it's going to be a position that will grow with me.

When asked about his current job as a wastewater treatment operator, "Will" revealed he had recently become licensed and noted there were different levels of licensures, which will allow him to advance:

> The higher up the license, the more responsibilities you have as an operator and you have a different role in the plant. And of course, with the bigger roles comes larger pay. At the moment, I don't have any plans to seek out another place of employment unless circumstances change or the possibility of having a better opportunity elsewhere develops.

"Tim" explained that he isn't certain which field he wants to get into, but believes because of what he has accomplished so far [having a degree], he has choices:

> I'm at a crossroads right now, with a couple different options. I'm not sure which one I wanna take yet, but I'll tell you what my education has done. It left me doors that will never close. I've met people along the way. I can always call them when I'm ready to take on a new career or anything like that, just because of my education.

The researcher was interested to learn if those participating in correctional education programs viewed [programs] as benefitting only themselves or if their experiences had broadened their mindsets to consider using what they've learned to positively impact others. Participants were asked "How have you or would you use your experience to affect others?" The majority had clearly defined plans to make a difference in their families, communities, and others around them and directly link their successes to education. "Mike" believes everyone should consider enrolling in some type of education program, saying "Well, I encourage everyone to, at the very least, look into going to community college. Education is key. Make yourself better."

"Anthony" has encouraged friends who are still incarcerated to get involved in an education program and uses his own experience as an example to his child, saying:

> I know a couple of friends that found themselves in a predicament and I've told them about the program. I've told them names, who to contact. So, I encourage the same thing that if you do find yourself [in a predicament], don't give up. Don't think, you know, like I did. You know I thought my time was gonna be dead. And I was actually able to get something out of it and I feel like I'm smarter from it. So, I encourage people that if they do find their self in, you know, a predicament or whatever to reach out for the same opportunities. But not only just in that predicament, you know, my kid, to set an example for them. I'm like look, you know, they're a knucklehead and I try to tell them...your daddy got in some trouble, but it wasn't cool and this is what's cool.

"André" began urging fellow incarcerated persons to pursue educational programs before leaving prison and has ideas about how he can motivate former classmates to press forward and help people in the community as well:

> The way I would use my experience to impact others is I wouldn't mind becoming a professor, you know. Maybe like an adjunct professor for the field. I've also been trying to, before I left prison, I was actually trying to get guys into that college program, left and right. I was trying to get them to put requests in to try to see if they wanted to do it. But even now, the guys that I'm keeping in contact with, I'm still trying to make sure that they're following through on their, you know, their opportunity.

"Gus" has made arrangements to share his experiences and educate young people, in hopes of preventing them from following the same path:

> I'm gonna take my experience incarcerated. I'm gonna take my experience at what sent me to prison to deter high school kids from doing the same thing. Get 'em while they're young. I've got permission from the sheriff of my county and the school board superintendent to go into the high schools.

"Joe" plans to seize the opportunity to use his experience to inspire others in his community, stating:

> I'm certainly using it. I have, my goal is, once I step out from here, is to go to NA/AA meetings and just share my story with others. Uh, reach out and try to help troubled adults or youths and explain, um, my situation and maybe they could find inspiration from that and change something that's going on in their life, that could better their outcome.

While participants have set goals for their careers, many have given careful thought about ways they can give back, upon receiving opportunities to better themselves. Their plans include continuing to build on the foundation of knowledge about their current positions and promoting to supervisory positions. They intend to carry their experiences out into the community in hopes of making a difference in the lives of others. Regardless of the paths they choose, they believe options exist because of what they learned while in college. All participants attribute their education as the key to positive future outcomes.

Education

A few participants are currently enrolled in college programs, furthering their goals of obtaining higher degrees, while most are focused on working and becoming

more knowledgeable about their current positions. Some are content with the degrees they have with no plans to return to the classroom anytime soon.

"André'" plans to complete a graduate degree and views such an achievement as the pinnacle of his formal education journey:

> I would like to finish my Master's. I definitely want to finish that. I don't think I'm gonna go to the highest level. I think I'm very comfortable with just with having - it's not just, because that's a big accomplishment - to have a Master's degree.

When asked about his future educational goals, "Joe" has enrolled to complete the last several classes needed to complete a second Bachelor's degree but isn't sure about his next steps:

> I can go back for an accelerated MBA program and do it in one year. I'm considering it and it's something I want to do. It now comes to factor what's best at this point? Is going for that going to help me progress farther within my career path? I do feel it will. And then there are other factors that come into where I'm at in life, you know, trying to set up my own place. Things like that. Financially, is this attainable?

Although he intended to pursue a graduate degree upon release, "Will" had to prioritize establishing a new life after a lengthy incarceration and has put off his educational aspirations for now:

> I actually put in my admissions for the Master's degree, but I never followed suit on it, for the simple fact (1) for financial reasons and (2) for time, because I knew that I had first, I literally, came out of prison with

> nothing, so I knew that I had to rebuild my life and be able to sustain myself before I could seek higher education. So that's pretty much where I'm at now, still in the building process. I consider myself a lifelong learner, so my education will never stop.

"David" is directing his focus on learning more about the water industry and mastering his skills:

> Continuing to learn. With this job opportunity, I get a chance to go on and not only get hands-on job experience hours, but I can continue to get these licenses. And with each license, it's like another degree. I can utilize that and continue to get more money, more educated, and become more of a valuable asset to the company.

"Wayne" doesn't intend to obtain a graduate degree, unless the circumstances support it:

> Um, I don't know if I'm going to continue after that since I got the bachelor's degree. I was thinking about pursuing my master's. But I'm really not sure if that's something I wanna do right now. I guess it depends on what job opportunities I find if I find you know where they say, if I find that I could be eligible for a promotion or a really good position if I was willing to go and get a master's degree, then sure, I might consider it. But right now, I don't think I'm gonna go back to school.

When asked about his plans to return to college, "Tim" shared similar sentiments, stating "None, I'm gonna say, unless I have a job and there's a Master's program that will

benefit the company. Then, I'll gladly go and do it. I've offered that to the company I work for now."

Finances

In response to any future goals regarding money, all participants shared the same sentiment – the desire for independence. They wanted to be comfortable, particularly after being incarcerated for lengthy periods of time and having to rely on others to support them. Each individual had his own view of what being comfortable looked like for his situation. In response to his future outlook on money, "Tim" described his goals of securing his financial future as:

> Just gonna get as much of it as I can and keep it for as long as I can, I guess. I want to be making six figures. I wanted to be making six figures within two years of getting out, but I don't think that's gonna happen. I'm working on it.

"André'" relayed his goals in terms of money as setting himself up to be in a good place, financially and views money an opportunity to give back to his loved ones:

> I want to be comfortable. I wanna be in a position where I could things for family members, you know. My family's been doing stuff for me for pretty much all my life, so I wanna kind of turn around and reciprocate that.

"Wayne" has no real worries about his financial future and expressed confidence in being able to live the lifestyle he chooses:

> I definitely have the tools there to make the amount of money I want to make. I don't think money is going to be an issue for me. A few more

> years from now, I'm not gonna be living paycheck-to-paycheck and worrying about getting evicted from my home. I think I definitely have the tools that I need to be financially stable and end up starting the family I want to have.

"Joe" explained his plans were to remain at his current job in water treatment systems and expressed a sense of loyalty to his employer:

> Stay here with my current employer, as they've given me the opportunity of hiring me on, taking a chance in a sense. Giving me this opportunity and working with me to be the best success I can in my training position and preparing me to become the operator when I get my license. So, for me, this is the profession I want. This is the career I'm going for.

The resounding responses about how to reach their financial goals consisted of realistic, long-term plans to work hard with an understanding that it would take time to get where they wanted to be. Participants did not expect to make quick money, but to look for legitimate ways they could use what they've learned in order to be successful.

Personal

When asked about future plans regarding family, participants gave mixed responses, based on having children (or not) prior to incarceration, the length of sentence and the age of the individual upon release. Each individual expressed his desire to make family a priority and to make up for time lost.

"Wayne", who does not have any children is excited about what the future holds, saying "I can't wait to start a family. I can't wait to get married and have kids. It's gonna be great."

"Will", who was married with a child prior to a lengthy incarceration, remains hopeful and welcomes the opportunity to remarry and have more children:

> I was married a long time ago and that didn't work out too well, but I definitely see myself getting married again, choosing the right person and when having kids, definitely so. I am blessed with having a loving family. At the moment, I am trying my best to strengthen the bond I have with my child because I have not been a part of their life for such a long time, so I know it will take some time and effort when it comes to building a stronger relationship.

"André" is content with spending time with his adult child, grandchildren, and extended family:

> No more kids, but we are a very close knit family. My cousins are actually like my brothers and sisters, so their kids are like my nieces and nephews. My main thing is, as far as family, is being financially in a position where I could do things for them. The family life and family values – stuff like that. To help build that kind of community, like a community I grew up in.

"Gus" doesn't intend on having more children, but instead, wants to reconnect with family he has missed during incarceration, saying "At my age, I'm probably not gonna have any more kids, but I got a grandchild that needs his grandpa. Now I get to spoil him and send him home."

Research Question 4 Theme: Impact of Incarceration

Incarceration has psychological consequences for formerly incarcerated persons that continue long after they are released (Schnittker & John, 2007). When exploring

"What role does education play in mediating feelings of self-stigmatization among formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in a postsecondary correctional education program?", the study examined the way individuals experienced the criminal label. Participants shared many of the same thoughts about having a criminal label and their experiences, managing the stigma associated with having served prison time. They expressed concerns about how others perceive them when applying for jobs or housing or when interacting with people, for the first time, who don't know about their pasts.

"Tim" explained how he attempts to ease adverse reactions when disclosing his criminal record:

> Anything you can ever think of I've experienced. Shock, fear, understanding, don't care. But the education does help. Actually, it's been my second line. Often, after telling somebody I did time in prison, (I add) but I got educated while I was in there. And at least, usually at least, it alleviates a little bit of their worry.

"Gus" provided a simple description of his feelings about having a criminal label, saying "It sucks. The experience? Nobody wants to be judged."

"Joe" described the way he experiences having a criminal record as shifting between both ends of the spectrum, but believed having a degree helps mitigate opinions others having about his past:

> Um, in some ways, it's, I feel like others that know it look at you differently. In other parts, I feel that some don't see it. Like they view you for who you are today even though they know about your past, they don't, it doesn't affect them. Like, they see you moving forward and what your

> future could look like. So, it's, being that I'm so fresh in reentering back out into society, I feel there's an element of society that says you've completed that. You're done with that. And what you've done since then, these achievements you've earned, really says more about who you are as a person and not so much as what you done. But that's in your past and moving forwards is what's important. And then there's times I feel that others know about your past and see you in a positive light, but also have that questionable judgment of you. And I feel like I can feel that. I can, I notice it, you know, so. Overall, I feel it's been very positive for me. But one of the major, um, situations with that viewpoint is my educational achievements. That is always been of the elements that's been brought up when, when discussing my past. And that's always been viewed very positively upon my character because of it. It's certainly has had a prolific impact on the way someone looks at me. Knowing that, in comparison to, just knowing I was incarcerated and what that charge is.

"Will" is reminded of his criminal label "especially during certain conversations with friends or colleagues when speaking on topics that include voting or the carrying of firearms, both of which I cannot carry out due to my criminal label restrictions."

Positive Outcomes

Additional questions were asked, in an attempt to assess if getting a degree while incarcerated had an effect on participants. When asked about the effects of education on their lives, all of the participants gave resounding, positive responses. Words like "beneficial, opportunity, confidence, and enlightenment", along with phrases such as

"increased my potential and boundaries" and "orienting myself towards the highest possible good", were used to describe how education impacted them personally.

While being interviewed, participants were asked to "Describe who you are as a person with a college education." "Joe" explained how he believes he has improved, overall, as a person:

> Well, I feel I'm a sharper version of myself now. My education has helped me to learn so much of the world but also so much about myself. And it's really helped me to like, I say, I'm very analytical of myself. Like I'm always reinventing myself but it's towards an improvement. And within it, I believe, you know, education has helped me to know myself better than I ever have before.

"Will" is pleased with what he was able to accomplish while incarcerated, saying "I'm still very proud of being college educated, especially in the circumstances that I received an education, and I can't be any happier."

"André" described how being in college helped him realize he can accomplish whatever he sets his mind to:

> I'm a very hard worker. I'm not the smartest cookie, but at the same time I can learn. You know I comprehend. If I put my mind to something I can accomplish it, you know, and that's just something, like I say, that I gained from being in college, you know, seeing those assignments, and you're knocking them out. You're getting graded on them, and you get A's and B's. It makes you feel good.

"Wayne" shared how he feels like he can also achieve whatever goals he sets:

> I feel like I'm a confident, strong-minded individual who is capable and articulate, um, and who is able to express my position on issues and move forth rightly throughout the world. I think I'm more than capable of accomplishing anything I set my mind to.

"Tim" believed he possesses certain positive attributes, but does not see a connection between them and having completed a college degree:

> I don't think the college education has a whole lot to do with who I am as a person. I think it might have made parts of me that are already, were there, better, maybe. But, I'm respectful. I'm real understanding. I'm real patient with people for the most part.

In an attempt to assess the individual's perception of himself since graduating from college, each participant was asked "What affects your life more – your criminal history or your education?". Seven of ten respondents said their education affected their lives in a more positive way.

"Gus" described how incarceration has helped shape the way he thinks and his behavior for the better:

> It's affected my life. Every aspect. It's taught me respect. It's taught me how to, uh, how to look at other people in a different way. Have perspective. It's taught me how to give back to society instead of take away from it.

"Will" sees his incarceration as only a minor setback and recognizes the positive impact education has made, particularly on his work life:

> My criminal history has a limited impact on my life because I don't allow it to discourage me or set me back from accomplishing the goals I set out in life. Because of my education, I don't just have a job. I have a career.

"André" relayed how obtaining his college degree has impacted his self-worth:

> Once I got into that program and started seeing that I was succeeding in classes, I really started getting my self-confidence back. And I feel a little bit more confident now that I'm out, to be able to apply for jobs with a college degree and it's getting a lot of attention from employers.

"Tim" explained the role education has played in his life, stating "It's made more confident, more reliable and more competent as well. It actually diminished negative aspects of myself when I have to mention to people about going to prison."

The researcher's roles as [first] a faculty member and [later] as liaison to a PSCEP required frequent interaction with students in both the classroom setting and in meetings to discuss program-related matters such as grades and upcoming course schedules. The researcher had an opportunity to observe students' behavior in-class and the ways they spoke and presented themselves in the prison environment. While many incarcerated persons expressed genuine gratitude for the opportunity to be in the program, there appeared to limited confidence, uncertainty, and little humor in prison. They simply dealt with their oppressive situations and did their best to learn and excel academically.

While conducting interviews with them over the Zoom meeting platform, on the telephone, and in-person, the researcher was able to observe significant changes in their mannerisms. Participants smiled when describing themselves as having a college

education. The sense of pride and confidence they have [now] compared to when they were incarcerated is as different as night and day. Their focus and the words they used to describe their experiences were intentional and well thought-out. Some received approval to be interviewed while at work, while others were interviewed during their off-time. Regardless of being on or off-the-clock at the time of their interviews, they were dressed as professionals and maintained eye contact while speaking. Consistently, participants were excited to talk about their future plans and expressed pure joy when discussing how they have been able to reconnect with their families and children. Their behaviors and spoken words appeared sincere and seemed to stem from a place of optimism and hope for the future.

An overarching goal of rehabilitative prison programs is to create a better version of the individual so they may become a productive, law-abiding member of society upon release. Ideally, if he can re-enter society with the ability to secure stable employment and to interact well with others, he is unlikely to return to prison. To evaluate the occupational and relational competencies PSCEP graduates believed they had acquired during their college experiences, participants were asked "What skills has education helped you develop or improve?" Their responses varied. "David" explained how pursuing a degree increased his confidence by boosting his ability to communicate more effectively, saying:

> I once was always shy and quiet, due to my lack of communication and writing skills. But college, due to a lot of reading and writing, has taught me how to articulate myself so that's one skill, and that's one valuable skill we need, you know, going forward in society. So, that it definitely

> gave me that skill because I could sit in an interview right now and express myself in many different ways that I never did before going to prison. I was ashamed. I was shy. I was, you know, filling out an application. It only made me feel dumb when I couldn't say I had vocational skills or college education or even a high school diploma. But it is totally different when you have these things, you work hard for 'em.

"Gus" was surprised about how much he uses math and other skills he learned while in college, thinking that once he graduated, Algebra would be a thing of the past:

> First and foremost, would be my math skills and then the things that I have to do on the job now. You know, the Algebra that I learned, as far as just, it's like everything about College Algebra I use now. Except maybe, you the logarithms and stuff at the end of the course. There's a lot of math involved in doing what I do. The computer skills, the computer application classes that we took, greatly benefited me because I can now take the math skills that I learned and apply them in a computer application in order to get the results of what I need to do the job now.

When describing the areas in which pursuing his degree helped him to improve, "Joe" stated:

> My writing skills. Communicating skills. I think those are probably the biggest. It's given me the confidence to really voice myself and find that, the inner person within and being able to express that in ways that can influence others or inspire different people to maybe change or to inspire them to pursue education.

André described the many skills he was able to develop, as a result of assignments in the college program:

> My vocabulary, my teamworking skills. We had a lot of group projects and you know, a lot of things, maybe an assignment you might not understand too well or somebody else didn't understand. So, you can kinda explain to them. It's almost like you became somebody you can, that they can talk to about assignments and you can kinda coach each other on, you know? His assignment versus your assignment. It gave me a lot of skills. It gave me patience. It gave me perseverance. It also gave me a measure of value. And it just gave me a perspective.

"Noah" explained how assignments in his college program helped him learn and implement various skills, particularly when it came to studying and being able to condense information:

> Critical thinking, problem solving. Certainly, like working, you know, in groups with other people. Time management, sort of. I still struggle with that pretty badly. But summarizing information too. Like taking, you know, you read a chapter out of a textbook and it's dense, like you get into the 3,000 4,000 level classes. You can't highlight a key word because every sentence is important and so being able to digest a chapter of information and regurgitate it into a reasonable sounding, 500 words. I think that's a really great thing to be able to do is to summarize, you know, because like it's one thing to memorize, but it's another thing to be able to

> reword information. That's how you really learn it, you know, in essence, teaching it.

"Will" discussed how being in an education program helped improve the way he communicates and has benefited him in his personal life, stating "Definitely on my communication skills. I'm better [to] articulate my thoughts, my feelings, and try to conveyed that as best as I can socially. Socially, I could be in different types of environments." When describing how he learned to relate better to others as a result of incarceration and what he learned in college, "Mike" talked about the areas where he improved as:

> Definitely my people management skills. I was notoriously ill-tempered prior to my most recent stay with the state and the entire experience helped me to learn to deal with people better. Does that make sense? I find that I'm more personable now. I don't know. Generally, I'm just a lot happier.

"Wayne" described how his college experience not only enhanced his communication skills, but opened his mind to contradicting perspectives:

> My writing skills greatly improved. You're writing, you know, numerous research papers and different essays on things. I was in that creative writing workshop so I've learned how to write and speak a lot better. It's also helped me. Okay, I guess the best way to explain it is through example. So, you know, you meet a lot of people that when you debate a topic with them, when you go into a discussion you have opposing viewpoints, people tend to get really angry and frustrated and mad with

> each other? I think that I've learned how to view someone's opposing viewpoint to mine and just accept it and not necessarily agree with them.

As a whole, participants in the study spoke positively about the skills they acquired or developed during their time in postsecondary correctional education programs. The assignments, group projects, and assistance they provided to another helped navigate the learning process and equipped them with skills they have been able to employ when reentering society.

Negative Outcomes

Participants were also asked how being incarcerated had affected their lives. Most gave responses about incarceration that were negative, citing how relationships with family and friends were severed or became distant. For those with children, their biggest sources of regret were being unable to raise them or be involved in their lives. "Wayne" talked about the negative impact of prison on himself as a first-time offender:

> One of the first things when you get in, it's almost like you're dehumanized, you know. They shave your head. They give you this DC number and the same uniform as everybody else. You just kinda have to go with the flow, especially if you don't come from a criminal lifestyle. You just have to make do with it the best you can. It calls you to question your self-worth.

"Noah" stated "It's gotta be that – the criminal thing, just because having that charge...having the degree is great, but not having certain privileges, it's kryptonite."

"Anthony" said "My criminal history affects me more than my education. The first thing people do when you go into business is your background check."

"Tim" explained his perspective as "I guess I haven't had to really use my education much, as far as explaining who I am as a person. It's hard to overshadow a criminal history."

While participants recognize the benefits of their degrees, they acknowledge challenges will always exist for anyone with a criminal record as the stigma associated with having been incarcerated still exists and can impact an individual, long after his sentence is over.

Mixed Outcomes

"David" viewed his incarceration as a blend of both positive and negative experiences:

> It [prison] affected my life in a negative way, not raising my children. But it has also had a good effect in my life because it gave me time to sit down and learn. I probably wouldn't have ever gone to college if not for being in prison.

"Will" explained how being incarceration impacted his life in both negative and positive ways:

> Well, depending on how one's perspective is, and looking at it, if we see the glass half full, half empty, and my perspective is half full. But, there's pros and cons. The cons are that it's definitely, suffered a lot of relationships due to the period of time that I was incarcerated, so I wasn't able to raise my child like I wanted to. I should have. So, after incarceration, I couldn't really get that bond that I wanted to have with my child. So that was one negative aspect, but there's also positive aspects, as far as it. I believe that, due to me being

> incarcerated, I was able to reflect upon many things in life, and know we're things went wrong. And now, I'm able to make better decisions.

"Gus" described the effects of education and criminality as infinite and finite concepts, saying "My education can't be taken away from me and it can also be enhanced upon, to endless bounds. My criminal history ceases, stops. It's over with. My education could go on."

"Mike" compared serving multiple sentences in prison as:

> Kinda like flushing the toilet. Um, it was not unexpected and [the end result] to a rather long spiral. So, in the long run, I'm probably gonna live longer because of it. So, it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. But at the time, it really sucked.

When sharing his view about the impact of education, "Joe" said "Education is a like a beacon of light leading me in life. It's given me the confidence to do the things I want to achieve. But it's also given me a lot of understanding with just everyday life."

"André" explained how education is helping to shape the new identity he intends to present in the professional world, saying "Companies are more forgiving on the criminal history. I want to be defined by my education and my good qualities, not by a criminal history."

Some participants have not forgotten their criminal pasts and view them as a concern, but acknowledge that having an education and being realistic that a criminal record may have adverse consequences are the keys to moving forward. Other outcomes of incarceration were being able to get through a lengthy sentence and come out with a

good attitude and college degree as a measure of mental fortitude, along with learning to interact with a diverse population.

"André" discussed how being incarcerated was difficult, but learning to interact with various types of people inside prison walls is a skill he employs when dealing with personal relationships outside prison:

> Oh, it affected my life tremendously, you know, um that was not an easy time, you know, but I got through it. You know, it showed me that a person can go through something as terrible as a prison sentence and come out with a positive attitude, you know, so. Just getting out and just dealing with family and friends and their different attitudes. I'm used it because I dealt with so many different types of people, you know, in prison, that I wasn't related to, I wasn't friends with. So, it's not the best situation to be in but I made the best out of my situation.

"David" said "I'm not just educated academically. I'm educated from my mistakes, from the streets. That's what keeps me thriving."

"Wayne" agreed, stating "My education is definitely going to be more impactful, long term. My criminal record led me to be incarcerated, but my education is going to be what helps me move forward and be successful in life."

Upon evaluating which has affected his life more, "Mike" remains positive but pragmatic, saying "Well, these days, my education does because I use it a lot more. But, especially during my job search, it was tough. I mean, how do you explain years of bad behavior?"

Summary

Chapter 4 provided an overview of the study and the research questions. The participant recruitment process was described in detail. Participant profile information was presented, including the average participant's age, recent incarceration sentence range, education levels prior to entering prison for the first time, and their combined postsecondary achievements. The data collection section required a detailed description of how data collection procedures were modified due to the inaccessibility of the Zoom meeting platform for recording and transcribing interviews by some participants.

The participant questionnaire used during interviewing was comprised of thirty-four questions related to five areas of interest: background, psychological and personal effects of education, family, reentry, and outlook on the future. The data analysis section discussed the methods used to conduct a line-by-line analysis of interview data and how patterns were identified. Processes of uploading the collected data into the qualitative software analysis program and using specific words to pinpoint their presence throughout the data were explained.

Four major themes emerged from the study: employment opportunities, family support, future goals, and impact of education. All themes included in this section were related to the research questions regarding the experiences of self-stigmatization of previously incarcerated men when seeking employment and reconnecting with family. Themes were also related to the perspectives of previously incarcerated postsecondary graduates about their futures since being released and the role education plays in mediating feelings of self-stigmatization among formerly incarcerated individuals who

participated in a postsecondary correctional education program. This chapter presented the findings of the study.

In Chapter 5, the researcher will discuss limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications of the study on postsecondary correctional education programs.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of PCEPs on participant self-stigmatization by exploring formerly incarcerated persons' experiences when seeking employment and reconnecting with family. The study also examined their perspectives about their futures since being released and evaluated the role of education in mediating feelings of self-stigmatization among participants.

Summary of Findings

The findings from the data revealed that formerly incarcerated persons held various entry-level, low-paying jobs and experienced gaps in employment prior to graduating from postsecondary correctional education programs. Upon being released, most had been hired for positions in industries related to their degrees and certifications. When deciding to participate in the correctional education program, half of participants were recruited by prison staff while the other half initiated the processing of enrolling themselves. They felt prepared to navigate the job-seeking process because of the skills they learned while attending their respective college programs. When filling out applications, participants were confident, because they were college graduates and were able to submit an accompanying resumé, they would receive interviews and were likely to be hired. Even though it was necessary to disclose criminal offenses when applying for jobs, most participants felt sure their skills and education would be of greater importance to a prospective employer than their criminal histories.

Upon reconnecting with family, the majority of participants reported having strong familial support during their time in prison despite how their criminal activities

had strained some relationships. Most participants expressed how the bonds between them and their families have been strengthened upon (family) seeing the steps taken by the formerly incarcerated person to improve themselves and prepare for successful reentry into the community. Their participation in correctional education programs helped to restore pride and respect that had previously been absent due to their incarcerations.

When examining participants' expectations about their futures, some revealed that prior to entering college, they had no goals while others had ideas about what they wanted to do, but lacked direction on how to implement their plans. Since graduating from a PSCEP and being released, the majority of individuals in the study are actively pursuing their goals, which include careers in their chosen fields or higher education. Participants believed they are capable of reaching their financial objectives, allowing them to live comfortably and be self-sufficient. Their plans regarding family varied, but all participants emphasized how remaining close with their loved ones had become a priority. Those with adult children have embraced the role of grandparent while others anticipate marriage and becoming parents as an exciting part of their futures.

Upon exploring the role education plays in managing self-stigma associated with incarceration, participants divulged the positive, negative, and mixed impact of serving time has had on their lives. Each individual recognized how serving time has given them a criminal label. While some think about the label more than others, all have decided not allow labels to prevent them from being successful or pursuing opportunities. Some of the positive outcomes of prison expressed include the chance to obtain their college degrees and self-improvement. The negative aspects of prison were how they were

treated as incarcerated persons and the long-term impact of having been convicted of certain criminal offenses prevents them from getting a driver's license or holding particular jobs. Others view their time in prison as a mixture of positive and negative effects. Becoming college-educated and getting a second chance to choose a different life, but missing their families and being in the oppressive environment of prison, were among the perspectives of incarceration being both a blessing and a curse.

Interpretation of Findings

According to Landersø (2015), because many incarcerated persons enter prison with little to no education, they experience difficulties securing gainful employment when reentering the community. The majority of participants in the study (8 of 10) entered prison with at least a high school diploma and some had taken college courses, prior to their first incarceration. However, all reported histories of working a variety of low-paying, entry-level work with consistent gaps in employment. Some had ideas of the type of work they wanted to do, but were without the knowledge or guidance to put a real plan in place to achieve their goals. Many settled for jobs that would give them a quick paycheck, absent any vision of pursuing the skills or education necessary to secure a career. While enrolled in their college education programs, individuals became versed in creating resumés, filling out job applications, and interviewing techniques. Their experiences, along with having a college education, equipped them with the knowledge and confidence to be successful in the employment process, despite their criminal pasts.

The theory "Incarceration is a family experience" termed by McKay et. al (2018) is supported in the findings of the study. The toll incarceration takes on families long-term is detrimental, as the separation of incarcerated persons from their partners and

children. Participants reported incidents of divorce, strained relationships with family, and admitted feelings of guilt as a result of not being part of their children's lives. Traditional families with both parents in the home typically face financial and relational struggles. In households of incarcerated persons, problems are exacerbated due to lengthy prison sentences and an inability to provide financial support to their loved ones. The high costs of telephone communication and travel expenses to visit when individuals are housed great distances from home serve as major obstacles to strong family support systems and often result in deterioration of relationships. While telephone contact allows an incarcerated person and his family to talk, it is no substitute for the in-person, face-to-face communication and physical contact needed by human beings (Clark, 2018).

Since many of the challenges of incarceration cannot be remedied while in prison, participants looked for other ways to strengthen bonds with their families. They found education to be a strong way to connect with loved ones. Upon being released, participants described how education was an essential tool in helping to rebuild relationships. Because of their criminal behavior, many felt as though they lost their family's respect. Setting goals and completing their degrees was a great first step towards reestablishing trust and proved they were serious about changing their lives. Achieving their own academic goals inspired many of their siblings and children to enroll in college. As a result of their correctional education programs, many acknowledge the need to choose wisely when letting others into their social circles. They realize that returning to old friends and habits can interfere with their goals and sabotage their futures.

Goffman (1963) theorizes that individuals with criminal histories often internalize negative feelings of low self-concept and as a result, suffer from depression and anxiety.

Many times, they realize people perceive them differently and often isolate themselves from society. In interviews with graduates of postsecondary correctional education programs, it appears education played a critical role in helping to manage feelings of self-stigmatization. While participants acknowledge they may be viewed negatively by some members of the community because of their previous incarcerations, they don't allow the possibility to keep them from pursuing opportunities. Instead, they continue to move forward, recognizing the current workforce is more favorable to giving second chances to those with criminal records.

Participants appeared willing to engage socially with others and were actively working to make up lost time with their families. During the interview process, participants described the various skills they had acquired while enrolled in their respective correctional education programs and were confident in their abilities to navigate employment processes, interact with others, and be successful in their transitions back into society. An overarching tone of gratitude for the opportunity to participate in a PSCEP and hope for their futures was present in each participant's interview.

Implications of Findings

Research studies examining the impact of educational programs on recidivism and employment are robust. However, findings are consistent with the existing, albeit limited, research into the positive effects of having completed a postsecondary degree while in-prison on self-stigmatization when seeking employment and reconnecting with family among participants. Because the effects of low self-esteem can be debilitating to the overall well-being of formerly incarcerated individuals and serve as a barrier to successful reintegration, continued study is necessary. Secondary to the individual,

correctional entities can benefit from research as they decide which reentry programs receive funding. With limited resources, investing in the most effective rehabilitative programs makes sense. The taxpaying citizen benefits when recidivism is reduced as the costs associated with prison operations continue to rise.

According to Petrich et. al (2022), 95% of incarcerated persons will reenter society, equipping a released person with a positive self-esteem and an education is advantageous to his community. Providing PSCEPs to incarcerated persons is a wise investment. In addition to the benefits of building self-confidence and acquiring skills to gain meaningful employment upon release, Postsecondary Correctional Education Programs can offer another benefit, the development of critical thinking. Critical thinking is a skill essential to good judgment, problem-solving, interpersonal communications, and the quality of one's writing. Improving inmate critical thinking skills will enable incarcerated persons to not only make better decisions without negative impacts, but will build confidence, self-esteem, and motivation, increasing the chances of success when the individual reenters society. A person who is able to successfully navigate the reintegration process can become gainfully employed and is able to financially support themselves and their families. They can be actively engaged in raising their children, which aids in the development of well-adjusted, happy adults. An individual who leaves his criminal past behind, to become a productive, law-abiding citizen is a win for all.

Limitations of the Study

The criteria for this study included: (a) formerly incarcerated men who had participated in a postsecondary correctional education program; (b) ten participants who were incarcerated in the state of Florida; and (c) data collection was the result of self-

reporting by participants. Gaining only the perspectives of men in the study was restrictive as expanding the study's scope, to include formerly incarcerated women who had participated in a PSCEP might have gleaned different results. The sample size of ten participants from a PSCEP in Florida was another limitation of the study. Even though participants' responses were content rich and provided sufficient data to answer the research questions, the small sample size and collecting data from a PSCEP in Florida limited the transferability of the study to other formerly incarcerated persons who had participated in PSCEPs. Data collection methods relied on self-reporting by participants, which is limiting, as perspectives about experiences can contain personal bias or may be exaggerated. In the interview process, questions may contain words that may be confusing or ambiguous to the individual being interviewed which can alter participant responses.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The first recommendation includes future studies to increase the potential participant group to include formerly incarcerated women, to assess how their participation in PSCEPs impact their post-release experiences and perspectives compared to those of their male counterparts. The incarceration experience for women varies greatly from men in terms of trauma exposure prior to entering prison and the carceral impact of being away from their children (Crewe et al., 2017; Wolff & Shi, 2011; Whidin, A., 2006). Exploring the methods used by formerly incarcerated men [versus women] to manage self-stigmatization could support a need for increased postsecondary correctional education opportunities in women's prisons.

The purpose of this study was to fill gaps in the literature about the impact of obtaining a college degree during incarceration on an individual's self-stigmatization. Being able to manage those feelings and maintain a positive self-image can contribute to a formerly incarcerated person's successful reintegration as they are likely to be confident, participate in normal activities, and engage in healthy relationships with family and friends (Evans et al., 2017). Instead of allowing feelings of shame about their criminal pasts to become an obstacle, their education and knowledge become tools of success in the workplace and for life, in general. Continued research is needed in the area of how education, especially PSCEPs, benefit the overall well-being of formerly incarcerated persons. Specific focus must be on the unique aspects of educational programs that provide further opportunities for those currently in prison to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to reenter society and become a successful and productive member.

State correctional budgets are always tight and as a result, programming is often reduced or eliminated altogether when operational costs associated with security, personnel, and healthcare for incarcerated persons increase. Because resources are limited, the process of selecting prospective students for postsecondary correctional education programs must be designed to identify not only those who meet the qualifications, but incarcerated persons who are likely to be successful in them. Academically, most anyone can pass the placement testing necessary to be admitted into college. However, a good candidate must also possess the maturity and perseverance to excel in a PSCEP. Half of the participants in this study discuss how they initiated interest in enrolling in the program while the other half were approached by prison staff. All

participants were successful in their PSCEPs, even if their interest stemmed from the perks of potentially living in a program dormitory. When approving candidates for postsecondary correctional programming, prison administrators could benefit from studies revealing the motives of incarcerated persons to participate in PSCEPs. They could use those findings to enhance their recruitment processes in attempts to invest resources into students who are most likely to benefit, both personally and professionally from program opportunities.

In order to explore the long-term impact of PSCEPs on individuals who participated in this study, longitudinal studies examining outcomes 3 years, 5 years, and 10 years, post-release would be valuable to the existing literature on recidivism, employment, and self-stigmatization of formerly incarcerated persons. There is an abundance of research about the impact of education on recidivism rates and employment success. Because the research about education and its effects on the individual's self-concept and their ability to manage self-stigma is relatively new and limited, few longitudinal studies have measured the long-term effects education has on the individual's ability to manage feelings of self-stigmatization.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that education plays a critical role in successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated persons. These results lend support to the implementation of additional postsecondary correctional education programs and modification to existing programs, to enhance opportunities to reduce self-stigmatization, and reduce prison recidivism rates. Future research studies of larger sample sizes, to include women who had participated in PSCEPs, would provide further data regarding

the efficacy of programs across a broader scope of people. Implementing any type of correctional education program in a prison setting can be a daunting task, for corrections entities and college partners alike. The current method of warehousing people until their sentences expire is not working as it perpetuates what has become known as “the revolving door of incarceration”. Setting aside the obvious benefits to the individual, reducing recidivism and the rising costs associated with operating prisons warrant a second look at PSCEPs as alternatives to other prison reentry programs.

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Appendix

Participant Interview Questionnaire

Appendix

Participant Interview Questionnaire

Question Categories

Background

(1) Age
(2) Degree(s)
(3) Year released
(4) Length of time incarcerated (most recent sentence)
(5) What was your education level prior to incarceration (first sentence)?
(6) Why did you start the education program?
(7) What were your expectations of the program going in?
(8) What immediate effects did participation have on your privileges/activities/status/respect?
(9) How have you used your education since being released?
(10) How has being incarcerated affected your life?
(11) How has education affected your life?
(12) What skills has education helped you develop or improve?
(13) How has your worldview changed since receiving the education?
(14) Describe the effect of education on your life in a word, phrase, or sentence.

Psychological and personal effects of education

(15) How did you view yourself prior to incarceration? While incarcerated (pre-education)? Since you left the education program?
(16) Describe your relationship with your professors.
(17) Describe your self-confidence before you started the education program. How has it changed since finishing the program?
(18) What effect did your education have on your willingness to meet others/network/engage socially?
(19) What effect did your education have on your willingness to pursue opportunities?
(20) How has education changed the way you think?
(21) Has education affected the way you deal with conflicts? If so, how?
(22) Describe who you are as a person with a college education.

Family

(23) What does your family think of you since graduating from the program?
(24) How has your relationship changed since your graduation from the program?
(25) How has education affected the trust and respect between you and your family?
(26) Were you the first in your immediate family to graduate college? If so, do your family members talk about this with you? How will this affect future generations in your family?

Reentry

(27) Did education give you any advantages when you came out? If so, explain.
(28) Describe your social circles. How have they changed from before your incarceration to now? How do you feel about former friends?
(29) Discuss your relationships with classmates from the program. How often do you keep in touch? What do you communicate about?
(30) What jobs did you have before incarceration? What jobs have you had since you got out? How has education helped?
(31) How do you experience the criminal label?
    a. How often do you think about your label?
    b. In what situations are you reminded about it?
    c. What affects your life more - your criminal history or your education? Explain.

Outlook on the future

(32) Looking back on your life before incarceration, what were your future plans?
(33) What are your goals for the future in terms of:
    a. Employment
    b. Money
    c. Education
    d. Family
(34) How have you or would you use your experience to impact others?

Table

Themes, sub-themes, and codes

Table

Themes, sub-themes, and codes

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
Employment Opportunities	Preparedness Motivation Confidence	EO-P EO-M EO-C
Family Support	Strengthened Bonds Pride Respect	FS-SB FS-P FS-R
Future Goals	Career Development Education Finances Personal	FG-CD FG-E FG-F FG-P
Impact of Incarceration	Positive Outcomes Negative Outcomes Mixed Outcomes	II-PO II-NO II-MO