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Stigmatizing Labels, School Bonds, and Capital  
in the School Reentry Experiences and Educational Outcomes  
of Justice-Involved Youth

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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## Acknowledgements

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

When I quit high school in November 1985, I had no idea where life would take me. I only knew that I no longer wanted to be in school. Despite my efforts to put as much distance between school and me, I found myself constantly returning to the classroom as a student and as a teacher. So the current point in my life journey – completing this dissertation to earn a PhD in the Curriculum, Culture, and Change track from Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Education – was certainly never a point that 16-year-old me looked forward to reaching.

But here I am. And I would never have reached this point without all the people along the way who believed in me, especially when I found it hard to believe in myself.

My mother, Dr. Nancy Makin, has always supported me and encouraged me. She blazed a trail as valedictorian of her high school class and later as the first woman to earn a PhD in Anatomy and Physiology at North Carolina State University. She always encouraged me to follow my own path, even when she didn’t always agree with the direction I chose to go. I cannot repay her love, patience, encouragement, and support. Thanks for everything, Mom.

My father, Robert Willis, always tried to make sure that I knew he was proud of me and my accomplishments. He has a New York gruffness and bluntness about him that I came to admire as I grew older, and he always encouraged and supported my teaching career, a profession for which he has great respect. Thanks, Dad.

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a small mill town in North Carolina. I'll always cherish those memories and the lessons they helped me learn as a child. They helped shape me into the person I am today, and I hope they are proud of what I have done.

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This study is a culmination of my professional and personal work in journalism, law, and education. Without the generous contribution of time and truth that study participants shared with me, it would never have reached completion. I cannot thank them enough for their trust, honesty, intensity, and commitment in sharing their experiences with me. In many ways, this work is more theirs than mine because they lived the stories while I just recorded them.

To Ann

*Car, vois-tu, chaque jour je t'aime davantage,  
Aujourd'hui plus qu'hier et bien moins que demain.*

Rosemonde Gérard

## Abstract

Research indicates that justice-involved youth who reenter public and alternative schools following contact with the juvenile justice system struggle to find a place in the school community and complete their educations. Because educational attainment affects recidivism rates, successful school reentry for justice-involved youth presents important research questions for policy and practice. This study examined school reentry through cases studies of adults who had been justice-involved youth and had experienced school reentry following contact with the juvenile justice system. Study participants' school reentry experiences were examined through a theoretical framework comprised of labeling, social control, and field theories. Findings suggest that institutional and human barriers make school reentry a complex, emotional experience for justice-involved youth. Findings also support the utility of a new theoretical framework – school exclusion theory – to describe the stigmatization, isolation, and alienation that justice-involved youth encounter from schools and school personnel who resist their reentry. Implications for theory and practice and recommendations for schools and school personnel are discussed.

**Keywords:** Social, cultural, economic capital, Bourdieu, school reentry, justice-involved youth

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## CHAPTER 1

“Arrest is an instantaneous, shattering thrust, expulsion, somersault from one state into another.”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

### Introduction

Contact with the juvenile justice system has significant negative effects on the educational outcomes of justice-involved youth. In addition, poor educational outcomes correlate to decreased life opportunities and increased delinquent and criminal behavior. For many youth, the initial contact with the juvenile justice system initiates recurring juvenile justice encounters; entries and exits to and from detention facilities; and graduation to the adult criminal justice system and jails and prisons.

Researchers in different disciplines have investigated the effects that institutional racial and gender biases, school discipline practices, youth gang affiliation, family and home environments, and substance abuse have on youth who engage in delinquent behavior to determine what contribution, if any, such factors make to increased or decreased delinquent behavior and juvenile justice system contact. Researchers also have examined correctional education practices, institutional programs, and offender/victim demographics to better understand delinquent behavior and rehabilitation possibilities. Despite efforts in different disciplines to understand causes and correlations driving youth juvenile justice system contact, one area has received scant attention: the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth.

School reentry is a dangerous passage for justice-involved youth, yet few researchers have sought to understand the lived experiences of the youth who are undergoing transition from secure facilities to schools. The absence of justice-involved youth in empirical research exploring transition phenomena leads to an incomplete picture of the factors supporting or

hindering their reentry to schools and completion of their educations. These important yet missing perspectives in education, juvenile justice, adolescent sociology, adolescent psychology, and correctional practices literature deprives policymakers at the local, state, and federal level of the data they need to make more informed, evidence-based decisions about transition program effectiveness, management, and funding for justice-involved youth. The incomplete data on which policymakers base their decisions regarding school transition programs for justice-involved youth leads to ineffective programs and practices that deprive the justice-involved youth of the resources and relationships they need to shed the negative stigmas associated with their delinquent statuses, build positive school bonds, and access the necessary capitals that could increase their educational attainment and reduce their delinquent behavior.

This multiple case study of four participants reflecting on the many challenges and few supports they encountered during their school reentry provides a window into the changed world they encountered during their school reentry. The experiences the participants recounted indicate that they encountered a school pushout process identified in this study's theoretical framework and illustrated through the roles that labels, school bonds, and capitals play in their efforts to successfully complete their educations. Because few studies have examined the school reentry experience through the stories of returning justice-involved youth, this study sought to center their voices through the primary research question: How do justice-involved youth experience school reentry?

The data on school completion for justice-involved youth indicate that few members of this vulnerable group who leave secure facilities successfully return to their community schools and complete their secondary educations. In the justice-involved youth population, Black males and students with disabilities are disproportionately represented. Justice-involved youth also face

influences and challenges outside of their schools that further complicate their successful school reentry and often leads to them being classified as dual- or multisystem involved due to their supervision or interaction with multiple social services agencies. Justice-involved youth also are far more likely to have suffered trauma or abuse prior to their juvenile justice system contact, which is often exacerbated by their removal from families, neighborhoods, and community schools and placement in secure facilities.

This study focused on one primary research question, three secondary research questions, and one tertiary research question. The primary research question focused on the overall school reentry experiences the study participants recalled from their time as justice-involved youth. The three secondary research questions focused on the application of the theoretical framework's labeling, school bonds, and capital components to the relationships, opportunities, and possibilities the study participants recalled gaining or losing as justice-involved youth undergoing school reentry. The tertiary research question focused on the educational outcomes the study participants achieved following their return to school as justice-involved youth.

The remainder of this chapter will address the following topics: the effects juvenile justice system contact has on youth; the study's purpose, rationale, and significance; the study's research questions; the theoretical framework; the study methodology; research risks and benefits; and terminology.

### **Justice-Involved Youth and Education**

Contact with the juvenile justice system has significant, lasting effects on vulnerable youth, for it might initiate years, decades, or a lifetime of criminal justice system involvement. Despite the challenges facing justice-involved youth, opportunities exist for them to recover

from their contact with the juvenile justice system, achieve successful school reentry, and reestablish or continue prosocial life courses.

### **Youth Arrest and Incarceration**

Despite recent reductions in nationwide incarceration rates, youth still enter and exit the juvenile justice system in alarming numbers. In 2010, juvenile courts handled 1.4 million juvenile offenses charged against youth (Sickmund and Puzzanchera, 2014). Multiyear trends in youth incarceration have revealed a steady decline in the youth population in residential facilities during the last 25 years, from 105,055 in 1997 to 36,479 in 2019, the most recent year data were available (OJJDP, 2021). Despite strides toward reducing juvenile incarceration rates, juvenile justice involvement continues to affect significant numbers of youth; in 2016, over 850,000 juvenile arrests took place nationwide (Puzzanchera, 2018a).

Youth encounters with the juvenile justice system do not always result in incarceration in secure facilities. Approximately 250,000 youth were under formal probation or community supervision across America as recently as October 2012 (Puzzanchera, 2018b). Formal probation or community supervision, which include transition from a secure facility to public or alternative schools, harbors both opportunities supporting reentry and hurdles leading to recidivism. Support for justice-involved youth has been a key component of federal education policy for decades. States receiving federal funding under Title I, Part D of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), must provide justice-involved youth with transition support to help them successfully reenter their communities and schools. But no national standard for reentry success exists, so determining “successful” reentry and compiling nationwide statistics present a challenge for the juvenile justice community interacting with this population; federal and state agencies administering

reentry programs and regulations; federal and state elected officials and policymakers crafting legislation and policy; and researchers studying this population. The most common reentry statistic used to determine reentry success applies a negative standard: recidivism – a return to criminal behavior– to determine a justice-involved youth’s success or failure during reentry (Sickmund and Puzzanchera, 2014). Even the use of recidivism statistics has significant drawbacks. Recidivism standards not only vary across states but also across different agencies and jurisdictions within states, so a patchwork of measures ranging from re-arrest to re-conviction to re-confinement determines whether a youth has recidivated (Sickmund and Puzzanchera, 2014). Despite the challenges that such a chaotic collection of measures presents, researchers have compared recidivism rates within populations and across populations, and their findings have been less than hopeful, with studies indicating that the majority of justice-involved youth fail to achieve successful reentry. Recidivism rates might be as high as 75% to 80% within populations of youth adjudicated for serious offenses (Brame, Mulvey, Schubert, and Piquero, 2019), while other estimates place recidivism rates around 55% (Snyder and Sickmund, 2006). Even though a few programs have achieved lower recidivism rates with the populations they serve, the likelihood that a youth will recidivate and reenter the juvenile or adult justice systems remains high and affects their educational outcomes.

### **School Dropout and Recidivism**

A single juvenile justice system contact – even contact that does not lead to arrest – increases the likelihood that justice-involved youth will not complete their secondary educations or pursue post-secondary educations. As Belkin (2020) notes:

Youth recidivism is a problem of critical proportions. When a young person has been incarcerated, released, and then recidivates, the probability of high school completion is

significantly reduced and the likelihood of having entered adult prison at age 25 is significantly increased. (p. 2489)

As Belkin (2020) noted, research has found negative relationships between juvenile justice contact and secondary school completion and post-secondary education attainment.

A study conducted with youth in Chicago Public Schools found that 73% of subjects who experienced juvenile justice system contact dropped out of high school in comparison to 51% of control group subjects who did not have juvenile justice system contact (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). The pattern held true for post-secondary education as well, with 18% of subjects who had been arrested enrolling in four-year colleges versus 34% of their peers who had not been arrested. In a study of over 4,000 delinquent middle and high school youth in Florida, Cavendish (2014) found that only 39% of subjects returned to school and only 8% earned any type of secondary diploma within three years of release. Other studies also have found a relationship between juvenile justice system contact and school dropout (Hirschfield, 2009; Hjalmarsson, 2008; Tanner, Davies, and O'Grady, 1999).

Research also has found that academic achievement and educational attainment negatively correlate to youth delinquency and recidivism rates (Katsiyannis, Ryan, Zhang, & Spann, 2008; Blomberg, Bales, & Piquero, 2012). In a 7-year study conducted with 12- to 18-year-old youth, Archwamety and Katsiyannis (2000) found that youth who had low academic achievement, especially in math, and participated in remedial academic instruction were twice as likely to recidivate or violate parole than youth in the nonremedial control group. The study authors also noted that other factors such as substance abuse and poor social skills have been associated with increased recidivism rates. A study conducted in Florida with 4,147 youth found that academic achievement during incarceration increased the likelihood of post-release school

attendance by 7% and that post-release school attendance significantly reduced the likelihood of arrest within 12 and 24 months after release (Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011). The researchers also noted that youth who regularly attended school after release committed less serious offenses when they did recidivate. In an examination of archived data collected during a 20-year longitudinal study of youthful offenders, researchers found that high school completion served as a potential turning point in the lives of subjects who first encountered the juvenile justice system after age 15 (“late starters”) and correlated with lower recidivism rates in subjects (Natsuaki, Ge, & Wenk, 2008). In contrast to the previously noted studies, a study examining psychosocial and psychoeducational factors among 299 adolescent males found that recidivist youth and non-recidivist youth did not differ significantly in educational achievement; however, the authors warned that this outcome deviated from findings in earlier studies (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Barrett, & Flaska, 2004).

### **Barriers to School Completion**

A school can be a confusing, frustrating environment for all youth, but returning justice-involved youth encounter more pronounced hurdles to success in school environments because they are more vulnerable to challenging educational demands and less likely to receive support from school communities. They also encounter formal and informal secondary sanctions that schools and school personnel impose on justice-involved youth because they are seen as members of a dishonored social class.

### ***Primary and Secondary Sanctions***

The juvenile justice system enacts primary sanctions against justice-involved youth for their unlawful acts. Negative societal responses to justice-involved youth result in secondary sanctions and often occur in tandem with primary sanctions. In the field of education, secondary

sanctions often take the form of formal and informal exclusionary policies and practices that hinder or prohibit school reentry and reduce the likelihood of successful school completion.

Liberman, Kirk, and Kim (2014) describe the short- and long-effects of secondary sanctions:

Students with criminal records are often pushed out of high school through exclusionary policies and segregated into specialized programs for problem youths. The result of the primary sanction (arrest) and the secondary sanction (school exclusionary policies and practices) is an increased likelihood of high-school dropout and diminished prospects for going to college, thereby leading to a greater likelihood of future criminality. (p. 348)

The secondary sanctions that justice-involved youth encounter during school reentry create an unwelcoming and sometimes hostile school environment for justice-involved youth. They might face frustrating academic or behavioral standards and experience loss of self-esteem and confidence, which encourage them to detach from the school community and engage in prohibited acts. They also might have difficulty getting along with school personnel and peers and respond with aggressive or avoidant behavior (Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

### ***Institutional Resistance to Reentry***

Researchers have identified institutional resistance from school personnel, unwelcoming and hostile school environments, and formal and informal school policies and practices as barriers to successful school reentry and school completion for returning justice-involved youth.

In a study examining juvenile justice staff views on justice-involved youth school reentry, Cole and Cohen (2013) identify school resistance to returning justice-involved youth as an almost insurmountable barrier to successful reentry. They write: “For students outside those school walls who are detained in the juvenile justice system, trying to find a way back in can be extremely challenging” (p. 14). Even justice-involved youth who make it through the

schoolhouse doors might find little welcome and support from school personnel, policies, and practices and choose to abandon school. Cramer, Gonzalez, and Pellegrini-Lafont (2014) argued that school dropout has been viewed through a lens that blames youth and has not taken into consideration the interaction between a school's institutional practices and youth who choose to drop out. Kubek, et al. (2020) identify the most common institutional hurdles to school reentry for justice-involved youth:

[N]umerous barriers exist within the school reentry process that prevent youth from returning to school following involvement in the juvenile justice system. The current literature identifies school-level barriers, such as stigma, increased surveillance once the youth is back in school, and school personnel attitudes and biases as common barriers that youth face during this process. (Kubek, et al., 2020, p. 7)

Altschuler and Brash (2004) suggest that justice-involved youth need significant support during school reentry but instead face active resistance driven by indifferent or reluctant school personnel, draconian school policies, and insufficient resources. They write:

[Delinquent] youth are likely to have great difficulty returning to school unless they receive special interventions, and these are in short supply. Because many delinquent youth come from inner-city schools already strapped for resources and because the schools face many other problems, school systems have often not been receptive to enrolling juvenile offenders. Also contributing to the problem with schools are zero-tolerance policies that make it difficult, if not impossible, to admit or readmit juvenile offenders. (p. 81)

In an article providing recommendations for school health professionals to assist justice-involved youth with mental health needs, Wood, Wood, and Mullins (2008) identify multiple barriers

justice-involved youth confront during their reentry to schools, including mental health issues, intellectual/academic disabilities, inadequate coping skills, limited family engagement, home environment stressors, problematic parenting styles, and probation/parole statuses. They recommended greater cooperation among school health professionals, school counselors, secure facility staff, and family members to facilitate school reentry for justice-involved youth; however, they did not provide guidance for teachers, administrators, instructional assistants, coaches, or other school personnel. Goldkind (2011) identifies barriers justice-involved youth encounter during the reentry process, including mismatch between the secure facility instructional calendar and the school instructional calendar; resistance from school administrators to admission or readmission of justice-involved youth; and concern about the effects justice-involved youth might have on standardized test scores. She describes the roles school social workers might assume as advocates and intermediaries to assist justice-involved youth during the school reentry process: “School social workers are embedded in the culture and context of the school community. They are ideally positioned to serve as liaisons between schools and the justice system, young people and the school, and young people and their families” (2011, p. 231).

In conclusion, the responsibility for school dropout has been placed on the youth who leave school when the school likely has played a substantial part in their decisions to leave, a possibility that applies even more significantly to justice-involved youth who face resistance to their school reentry. Instead of creating opportunities for all students, schools and school personnel impose formal and informal secondary sanctions on returning justice-involved youth and ultimately push out one of the most vulnerable populations in need of education.

### *Stigmatization Leads to Isolation*

Returning youth carry stigmas from their juvenile justice involvement and find that their statuses adversely affect their ability to form bonds based on prosocial behavior with school personnel and peers, which hinders their access to the capitals they need to support their school completion. Researchers have defined the term “prosocial” in different ways, but many definitions share similar characteristics. At its broadest level, prosocial behavior is “behavior intended to benefit another,” which includes helping, sharing, or comforting behaviors (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010, p. 145). A subset of prosocial behavior – altruistic behavior – has been attributed to moral concerns or emotions focused on others instead of pragmatic or egotistic concerns focused on the self (Eisenberg, Eggum, & Di Giunta, 2010).

Because justice-involved youth carry stigma associated with their juvenile justice system involvement, they are often viewed as lacking the prosocial behavior school personnel expect students to demonstrate in school environments. Cramer, Gonzalez, and Pellegrini-Lafont (2014) described the stigmatization process as a misalignment between students and schools: “The disconnect between student culture and school culture is at the root of student performance, where certain behaviors begin to be seen as deficient and inappropriate” (p. 463). The research literature also lends support to the negative effects stigma has on the decisions justice-involved youth make about continuing or abandoning school: youth who drop out report feelings of isolation and a lack of belongingness before they leave school (Staff & Kreager, 2008).

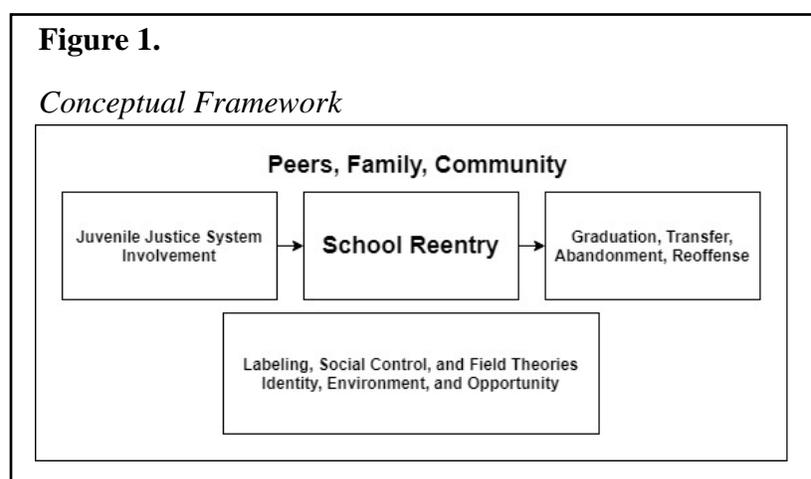
In other words, justice-involved youth carry an imposed stigma that alters their interactions with school personnel and peers, resulting in isolation from important relationships and resources that typically encourage prosocial behavior and support successful school completion. The belief harbored by school personnel that justice-involved youth lack prosocial

behavior becomes a self-fulfilling expectation, leading to stigmatization and isolation, which discourage justice-involved youth from pursuing reintegration into school communities.

### Purpose of the Study

Juvenile justice system contact often marks the beginning of a long and winding journey for youth through waypoints in the carceral archipelago: criminal offense, adjudication, disposition, community supervision or incarceration, reentry, and recidivism or re-offense, which begins the cycle once again and often increases the severity of sanctions imposed on youth for

subsequent offenses. The school reentry process presents justice-involved youth with opportunities to reengage with schools, school personnel, and prosocial peers and pursue positive educational paths, but



the existing literature reveals little about how justice-involved youth reentering schools access resources and relationships that might improve their reentry success and improve their educational outcomes. Researchers have incompletely charted this stage (Figure 1), relying primarily on quantitative studies to examine successful and unsuccessful transition policies, practices, and programs as determined by factors such as recidivism rates; however, quantitative studies and recidivism rates reveal nothing about the transition experiences for the justice-involved youth undergoing school reentry. This study's focus on the school reentry experience from the perspective of adults who had undergone reentry as justice-involved youth provides insight into school reentry as they experienced, processed, and characterized it. It reveals how

they experienced school reentry – and succeeded or failed – and adds to the available data about effective and ineffective transition programs and school practices. By giving voice to adults who experienced school reentry as justice-involved youth, this study seeks to empower youth undergoing the difficult reentry to their communities and schools and present opportunities for future research and policy development to support this vulnerable population.

### **Rationale for the Study**

In the research literature, few studies have examined the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth and incorporated their voices as valid and reliable data sources. Because justice-involved youth often have proven to be a difficult population to track, researchers and policymakers have relied primarily on quantitative data to study this population, but quantitative examinations of justice-involved youth also have proven insufficient for effective policy, practice, and program development. In a national report prepared for the U.S. Department of Education by the American Institutes for Research, state officials tasked with monitoring the outcomes of justice-involved youth following community and school reentry indicated that they had little or no knowledge of reentry outcomes for justice-involved youth:

Nearly two-thirds of all [state agency] coordinators (66%) and more than half of all [local facility program] coordinators (51%) reported that it was very difficult for their facilities to track outcomes for youth who exited placement, while less than 10% of both [state agency] and [local facility program] coordinators said it was not very difficult.... Additionally, 58% of all [state agency] coordinators and 47% of all [local facility program] coordinators said their facilities were unable to track outcomes for any youth once they exited placement. (Read et al., 2019, p. 63)

The research literature lacks qualitative studies that examine the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth returning from residential facilities. Researchers have given little attention to this silent population, and the missing voices leave a knowledge gap in the research literature that hinders understanding of the factors that this population encounters during school reentry. This study provides insight into this population in ways that prior studies have neglected. The data this study has generated complements the limited data available through existing quantitative studies and provides a different perspective for decisions regarding school reentry policies, practices, and programs at federal, state, and local levels.

### **Significance of the Study**

Youth incarceration creates significant cost burdens for individuals and society. Researchers estimate that the average cost of incarcerating one youth under the most restrictive confinement practices to be \$148,767 per year (Petteruti, Schindler, & Ziedenberg, 2014). In addition, the long-term incarceration costs (recidivism, lost future earnings, lost future tax revenue, and other secondary and tertiary costs) have been estimated to be between \$8 billion to \$21 billion each year (Petteruti, Schindler, & Ziedenberg, 2014).

Federal legislation also requires that states receiving funds under Title I, Part D of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), use part of the funds to provide transition support to justice-involved youth to help them make successful reentries from secure facilities to their communities and schools. Studies that found poor educational outcomes among justice-involved youth indicate that a significant percentage of this population fails to make successful reentry to schools and complete their secondary education. No clear causes for poor education outcomes have emerged from these studies, but the studies that focused on this question examined the program outcomes

and efficacies for justice-involved youth, not the experiences they encountered during their reentry. This study incorporates the missing perspective of justice-involved youth and contributes rich data to provide more insight into the factors affecting school reentry for this population. This study's findings suggest areas for discussion regarding existing policies, practices, and programs; provides recommendations for additional research areas; and identifies possible school personnel roles to support successful school reentry for justice-involved youth.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study went through multiple iterations in consultation with researchers versed in qualitative research design and US Department of Education staff assigned policy and program management for school and community reentry programs. Existing research literature, research challenges, available resources, and research question structure and purpose influenced the development of this study's research questions. The study incorporated a dynamic, recursive theoretical framework to provide flexibility to research question modification driven by data collection and analysis. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do justice-involved youth experience school reentry?

RQ2: How do justice-involved youth perceive their relationships with school personnel and peers?

RQ3: How do justice-involved youth perceive their school engagement opportunities?

RQ4: How do justice-involved youth perceive their access to educational benefits?

RQ5: How do justice-involved youth perceive the relationship between their school reentry experience and their educational outcomes?

The research questions for this study align with the recommended forms and purposes proposed by Agee (2009). While the research questions contained some degree of overlap, their

investigatory focus complemented each other and provided slightly different but equally important research paths and potential responses.

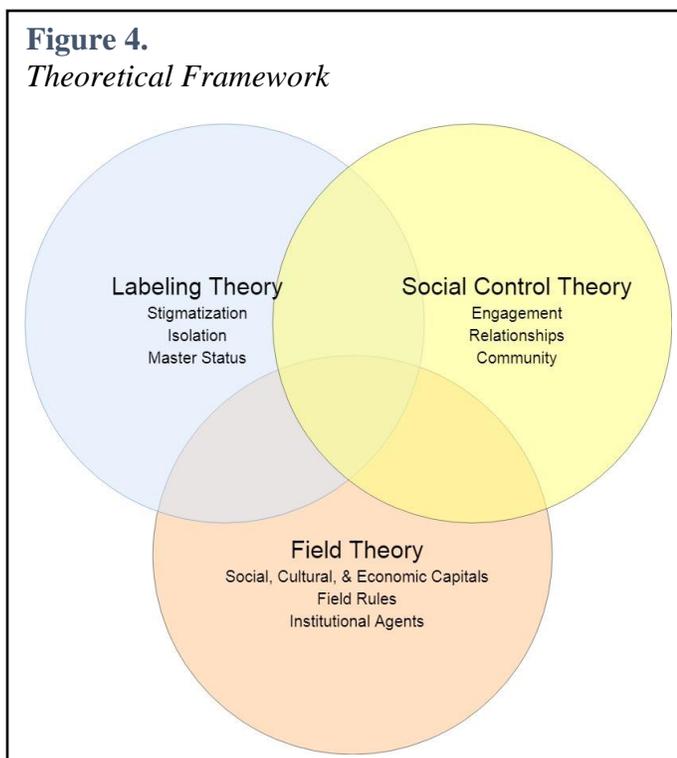
### Theoretical Framework

Social, psychological, correctional, and educational theories provide different explanations for the reentry outcomes justice-involved youth experience when they return to schools and communities. This study's theoretical framework (Figure 2) drew on labeling, social control, and field theories developed by researchers studying crime, deviance, and sociology to describe the environment and influences affecting the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youths.

These existing social theories created a blueprint for this study and provided a loose guide to all phases of

the research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). As this study progressed, the theoretical framework evolved to explain findings arising from data collection and analysis of the study participants' reflections on, and descriptions of, their school experiences before, during, and after their contact with the juvenile justice system.

The theoretical framework describes two parallel processes occurring simultaneously and affecting the reentry experiences of justice-involved youth – a superordinate process embodied in formal and informal school institutional policies and practices and a subordinate process



embodied in school institutional agents' roles in consciously and unconsciously enforcing school institutional policies and practices. Labeling and social control theories describe the actions and inactions of school institutional agents that adversely affect justice-involved youth. These actions and inactions impose stigmas on justice-involved youth associated with their statuses; create inequitable challenges to their reentry; and deny access to social, cultural, and economic capitals that school bestow through educational benefits. Field theory describes the entrenched formal and informal institutional policies and practices in schools that replicate and perpetuate existing social stratification and inequities; ordain existing social, cultural, and economic capitals; and allocate future social, cultural, and economic capitals. Taken together, these three theories provide a possible explanation for the resistance justice-involved youth encounter from schools as institutions and from school personnel as institutional agents.

### **Labeling Theory**

Even though labeling theory emerged during the late 1930s, it only achieved recognition in the early 1960s as one of many competing theories that researchers believed might describe the development of delinquent behavior (Becker, 1963). Interest in labeling theory declined during the 1970s, but researchers have reintroduced it with stronger theoretical and empirical support and argue that it provides an explanation for the mechanisms that lead to delinquent behavior (Bernburg, 2009). They believe that delinquent, deviant, and criminal labels carry stigmatizing markers which not only affect those who receive the delinquent labels but also affect those who interact with the labeled individuals. They suggest that society imposes these stigmatizing labels through formal rituals such as arrest, adjudication, incarceration, and probation but believe that no parallel mechanisms exist for label removal once labeled individuals have satisfied justice-related obligations. They also argue that individuals who have

received stigmatizing labels often embrace the perceived characteristics of the label they have received and adopt this new “master status” and its associated characteristics, which creates additional negative perceptions and further alienates them from prosocial networks.

Labeling theory suggests an explanation for the negative perception that school institutional agents have of justice-involved youth and presents possible motives for the isolation that schools and school personnel impose on justice-involved youth. It also provides a context for the negative self-perception that justice-involved youth adopt. In other words, labels such as “delinquent” or “criminal” that schools and school personnel assign to justice-involved youth influences not only their “master status” and their perceived selves but also their interactions with members of the school community. The interaction of these internal and external perceptions affects the school reentry of justice-involved youth, for they encounter actual and perceived stigmatization from school personnel and peers and adopt a master status that justifies the stigmatization. Thus, they are less likely to feel integrated into the school community and are more likely to abandon school.

### **Social Control Theory**

Social control theory provides insight into the engagement and relationships that individuals form with social institutions such as schools. The theory suggests that social bonds such as attachment to others, commitment to conventional behavior, involvement in prosocial activities, and belief in shared value systems bind individuals to social groups, communities, and institutions (Hirschi, 1969). Individuals identified as delinquent or deviant recognize common value systems shared by groups, communities, and institutions but choose to adopt delinquent behavior or deviant behavior because they feel rejected by the common social system and, in turn, reject the values of the common system (Wiatrowski, 1978).

Families, peers, schools, employers, and neighborhoods, among other social groups and organizations, serve as the anchors to which individuals moor themselves through social bonds. Schools and school personnel are significant anchor points for school-aged youth. Justice-involved youth carry a stigmatized status that creates hurdles to bonds and relationships with schools, school personnel, and peers; academic success and recognition; prosocial school-related activities; and a common value system promoted within the school community. For justice-involved youth, the real and perceived rejection they feel from schools, school personnel, and peers leads them to further isolate themselves and reduces their access to the prosocial bonds and relationships associated with successful school reentry.

### **Field Theory**

Bourdieu's field theory describes societal stratification through reproduction of dominant and marginalized classes; adoption of habitus (or disposition) through indoctrination processes governed by social institutions; and creation of advancement opportunities through access to social, cultural, and economic capital. Field theory offers insight into the social forces influencing school reentry experiences for justice-involved youth and complements labeling and social control theories.

Field theory suggests that society rests on a "space of positions" in which the highest positions require significant capital to occupy. Society is also divided into smaller social sub-spaces that correspond to fields such as education, civil service, and religion, which exist in complex and interactive relationship with each other (Wacquant, 1993). Bourdieu argued that social analysis should focus on the relationships among these sub-spaces/fields and the mechanisms that reproduce these relationships because the fields exist not to serve individuals by placing them into preordained positions, though that occurs, but to maintain a field's existence

and relationships with other fields (Wacquant, 1993). Field theory offers insight into the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth because it offers a lens through which to examine the effect their dishonored status has on their access to capital embodied in the educational benefits schools as fields bestow or withhold from students.

### **Methodology**

This study conducted a qualitative examination comprised of case studies of four adult study participants who had been justice-involved youth as adolescents and young adults and underwent school reentry to public schools, alternative schools, or alternative education programs housed in a public school. Data collection took place through two, hour-long semi-structured interviews conducted with study participants. Data analysis occurred during and after data collection. The study participants were drawn from an adult population who had been justice-involved youth as adolescents.

### **Research Risks and Benefits**

Research examining the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth through the reflections of adults who had undergone reentry as adolescents presented limited risks. Study risks were offset by potential benefits to school reentry policy, practice, and program development for justice-involved youth and other vulnerable populations. In addition, this study's focus on centering the voices of study participants through their stories and interpretations served as an empowering experience for them.

The two most likely risks associated with the study were privacy concerns and subject emotional wellbeing. Potential privacy violations were a risk facing study participants because data regarding criminal offenses, academic progress, and personal relationships at home, in schools, and in communities, among other data, were collected from study participants. To

counter this threat, data security measures were in place throughout the study. Study participants and study sites were assigned pseudonyms to provide additional privacy protections. Specific identifying data were removed or altered in the interview transcripts to protect study participant privacy. All study data were stored on a password-protected virtual drive and on a password-protected external hard drive.

Study participants' emotional wellbeing also was a risk inherent to the study. Participants underwent a challenging school reentry experience, which was a difficult experience for them. The study took the following steps to ensure that participants' emotional wellbeing was protected throughout the study: regular check-ins with participants to ensure that they were emotionally secure about study participation; reminders to study participants that their participation was voluntary and that study withdrawal was available at any time; and post-interview follow-ups with study participants to include them as contributing partners in the research process.

This study's benefits far outweighed the possible risks to participants. First, study participants voluntarily shared their experiences and views about their school reentry experiences, which they found to be an empowering experience. Second, the study collected valuable data and developed findings from this data directly from study participants who had been justice-involved youth, which has been an overlooked data source in this research area. Third, study findings present suggest discussion topics to develop more effective school reentry policies, practices, and programs.

### **Conclusion**

Researchers have examined the school reentry experiences and educational outcomes of justice-involved youth through quantitative lenses but have omitted justice-involved youth as primary data sources in their studies. The absence of data derived from justice-involved youth

has led to an incomplete understanding of the school reentry phenomenon and hindered effective policy, practice, and program development. This study applied a theoretical framework comprised of labeling, social control, and field theories to an examination of the school reentry phenomenon through the voices of four study participants who had undergone school reentry as justice-involved youth. The chapters that follow describe this study's relationship to the research literature, the development of its theoretical framework and methodology, and its data collection, analysis, and findings. The final chapter discusses limitations, theoretical and practice implications, and recommendations. It closes with study participants' epilogues.

### **Terminology<sup>1</sup>**

**Adjudication [of Delinquency]:** Analogous to an adult “conviction,” it is a formal finding by the juvenile court, after an adjudicatory hearing or the entering of a guilty plea/admission, that the juvenile has committed the act for which he or she is charged.

**Adjudicatory Hearing:** The fact-finding phase (i.e. the trial) of a juvenile case. At this hearing the judge—or in a limited number of jurisdictions, the jury—receives and weighs the evidence to determine whether the facts prove the charges alleged in the delinquency petition beyond a reasonable doubt. If the juvenile is found guilty (or involved) at the adjudicatory hearing this finding is called an “adjudication.”

**After Care:** Also known as “parole” in some jurisdictions, it is supervision of a juvenile who has been returned to the community on conditional release following a commitment or

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology based on definitions from the National Juvenile Defender Center (n.d.)

incarceration. The youth must comply with certain conditions of release and is monitored by a caseworker or parole officer. Parole can be revoked if the youth does not comply with conditions.

**Commitment (also known as Placement or Incarceration):** The transfer of legal responsibility over the child to the state and often includes placement in a private or state-run facility. In many jurisdictions the court will impose an indeterminate sentence upon transferring custody of the respondent to a state agency, allowing the agency to determine when the youth may be released from incarceration based on good behavior, noted rehabilitation, and the youth's prior juvenile record.

**Delinquent Act:** An offense committed by a juvenile that would be classified as a crime if committed by an adult.

**Detention:** Juveniles charged with delinquent acts may be detained by court order pending an adjudicatory and/or disposition hearing. A youth may be placed in a detention center at different points throughout the juvenile case. At times, an adjudicated juvenile may be held in detention during a period of their commitment.

**Detention Hearing:** A hearing in which the judge decides whether to detain the child pending an adjudicatory hearing in a delinquency matter.

**Disposition:** The juvenile equivalent of an adult sentence, disposition is a final decision as to how a juvenile's case is handled after an adjudication.

**Disposition Hearing:** Akin to a sentencing hearing in criminal court, this hearing is held after a juvenile has been adjudicated.

**Diversion:** Refers to any program that is an alternative to the filing of a court petition and which keeps the youth from entering the juvenile court system by referring the child to counseling or other social services.

**Justice-involved youth:** A youth who has been found by a judge in juvenile court to have committed a violation of the criminal law, that is, a delinquent act. The judge can formally adjudicate the youth as an initial step before imposing a disposition (a sentence or punishment), or the judge can decide not to adjudicate the youth and instead impose conditions that, if met, will result in dismissal of the charges.

**Probation:** A disposition option available to the court as an alternative to commitment, in which an adjudicated juvenile may be released back into the community under certain conditions and under the supervision of a probation officer for a specified period of time.

**Status Offense:** An offense that would not be a crime if it were committed by an adult.

Examples of these non-criminal offenses that are only applicable to children include: truancy, curfew violations, running away from home, incorrigibility, and ungovernability.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the literature review underlying the study. First, it describes the methodology used to identify and compile the research presented in this and other chapters. Second, it details field, labeling, and social control theory origins, relevant characteristics, and use in relevant studies. Third, it describes existing school reentry studies, including common methodologies used to examine school reentry. Finally, it identifies the absence of research that centers the voices of justice-involved youth. A summary of the research literature and its relevance to this study concludes this chapter.

Few researchers have examined the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth from the perspective of the youth themselves, yet this population has deep insight into factors affecting their successful return to school and completion of their secondary educations. In addition, justice-involved youth recognize that education provides tangible benefits for their future life courses. Fields and Abrams (2010) conducted a study with 71 male and female youth exiting two secure facilities in Southern California and found that their participants identified high school completion or GED attainment after reentry as an important need, yet the participants recognized that they lacked the necessary knowledge to meet this need. In other words, justice-involved youth want to complete their educations, but they acknowledged that internal and external factors complicate their ability to successfully do so.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter and study to identify all the possible moderating variables negatively affecting the educational outcomes of justice-involved youth; however, the process of identification, isolation, and alienation that begins when they reenter schools and ends

with their departure either through graduation, transfer, abandonment, or re-offense remains an important and relatively unexplored research path.

### **Methodology**

Because extensive literature on juvenile justice exists, crafting an effective search for literature relevant to this study posed a significant challenge. In contrast, the literature search for relevant material related to labeling, social control, and field theories proved to be less problematic.

Juvenile justice literature spans multiple disciplines and examines seemingly inexhaustible research questions related to causes, interventions, treatments, and other important research topics. This deep and broad body of work encompasses theoretical articles, qualitative and quantitative empirical research, literature reviews, and meta-analyses. I began my search for articles related to justice-involved youth and school reentry in Google Scholar to establish a pool of possible articles for inclusion in the literature review. An exploratory search using the terms “justice involved youth” and “school reentry” generated approximately 33,300 articles. I also used the search terms “justice involved youth” and “school reentry” with ProQuest, EBSCO, and PsycINFO databases. ProQuest identified 20 articles (3 scholarly journals, 1 book, and 16 dissertations/theses); EBSCO identified 3 articles (all scholarly journals); and PsycINFO identified 1 article (a scholarly journal that also appeared in the EBSCO search).

To focus on the way labeling, social control, and field theories interact to describe the experiences of justice-involved youth returning to schools from residential facilities, I planned to include theoretical papers that conceptualize theory elements and research reports that use these theories for their frameworks. Because labeling, social control, and field theories have long histories, I also planned to include early articles and study reports from theorists and researchers

who developed the theories and expanded them. I started the literature review search with an exploratory search in Google Scholar using the terms “labeling theory,” “social control theory,” and “field theory.” Google Scholar returned 20,000 results for labeling theory, 15,000 results for social control theory, and 2,130,000 results for field theory. I repeated the exploratory search with ProQuest, EBSCO, and PsycINFO databases. ProQuest returned 2,470 results for labeling theory, 289 results for social control theory, and 1,325 results for field theory. EBSCO returned 16,726 results for labeling theory, 2,818 results for social control theory, and 111,275 results for field theory. PsycINFO returned the same totals as ProQuest.

The following sections provide more granular details about the search methodology and strategies used to identify articles for the theoretical framework literature review and to identify articles for the justice-involved youth and school reentry literature review. Because the search for relevant articles for this literature review occurred over months and involved scores of search sessions, the descriptions of search activities and specific results are intended to serve as noncomprehensive examples that illustrate the search process.

### **Field Theory Literature Search**

My exposure to Bourdieu and field theory occurred during my course of studies in the curriculum, culture, and change PhD track at Virginia Commonwealth University. The theory immediately struck me as having possible utility as part of my theoretical framework. The literature on field theory seems endless, so I crafted a database search using variations and combinations of “Bourdieu,” “social, cultural, and economic capital,” and “habitus” with “juvenile delinquent,” “juvenile delinquency,” “justice-involved youth,” “school,” and “reentry” and “return” to narrow possible candidates for further review and consideration. I tried multiple combinations of key search terms but found little success connecting Bourdieu and field theory

to the school reentry phenomenon I intended to examine. For example, a Google Scholar search using the terms “field theory,” “juvenile delinquent” “school,” and “reentry” returned no results. Replacing “field theory” with “Bourdieu” generated 23 results, with 4 results directly related to justice-involved youth; however, a closer examination of these articles excluded them from the literature review because they were unrelated to school or community reentry and duplicated information that I had compiled from theoretical works.

I initially restricted my field theory search to works published during the last ten years, but I learned that very few works applied a Bourdieusian theoretical framework to justice-involved youth in any context that would be relevant to my research. Thus, I expanded my search’s time frame to search for relevant articles, though this ultimately produced few additional works for consideration. I had what I believed field theory had an essential place in my theoretical framework, but no research reports applied field theory to the specific phenomenon of school reentry. Even though I found no research directly on point, I believed that field theory’s description of social replication and stratification, habitus (or disposition), and capitals to be essential to a theoretical framework that describes the process justice-involved youth undergo when they return to school, receive stigmatizing labels, suffer isolation from school relationships, lose bond-formation opportunities, and access few, if any, educational benefits. It became necessary to extrapolate field theory from existing research to incorporate it into a theoretical framework that I believed would describe the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth.

### **Labeling Theory Literature Search**

Using search terms such as “stigma,” “stigmatization,” “labels,” “labeling,” “juvenile delinquent,” “juvenile delinquency,” and “justice-involved youth” combined with variations of

“school,” “reentry,” and “return,” I searched databases for peer-reviewed articles, conference presentations, books, book chapters, and other relevant materials. I determined that combinations of three or four search terms produced limited results that had potential relevance for the literature review. For example, a Google Scholar search incorporating the terms “labeling theory,” “juvenile delinquent,” “school,” and “reentry” produced 102 results. Other databases produced more limited results with these terms, with Academic Search Complete and PsycINFO both producing 0 results. Using PsycINFO’s suggested search terms “labeling theory and juvenile delinquency” produced 193 results for all works, including dissertations, theses, and non-peer-reviewed articles, published since 1957. To further narrow search results, I reran searches to identify peer-reviewed articles published within the last ten years (40 results in PsycINFO) and limited the results to works directly or indirectly connected to the US juvenile justice and education systems (15 results in PsycINFO). I reviewed abstracts where available and discarded works that lacked direct relevance to labeling theory, justice-involved youth, and school reentry. This process allowed me to identify reliable, credible works for deeper review. I also identified additional works that had fallen outside of my database search by reviewing references in articles that I had selected for use in my literature review.

### **Social Control Theory Literature Search**

I identified social control theory by initially exploring school bonds, which is a phenomenon that has undergone a significant amount of research during the last thirty years. I identified search terms such as “bonds,” “connections,” “relationships,” “climate,” “engagement,” and “environment” related to social control theory and combined them with “juvenile delinquent,” “juvenile delinquency,” “justice-involved youth,” “school,” “reentry,” and “return” used in previous searches. I identified significant literature connecting “social control

theory” and “juvenile delinquency” (151 results in PsycINFO; 5,120 results in Google Scholar), but I found few articles through searches combining the broad search terms “school bonds,” “juvenile delinquents,” and “school reentry” (0 results in PsycINFO; 2 results in Google Scholar; 4 results in Google). I used references from relevant articles to identify additional articles for examination. This process led me to the identification of social control theory and its application to the school environment. I ultimately determined that a social control theoretical framework had not been directly applied to the narrow phenomenon of justice-involved youth and school reentry experiences. After reviewing social control theoretical frameworks described in the literature, my belief increased that this theory provided a partial explanation for the process justice-involved youth undergo during school reentry. Specifically, the bonds youth form through relationships with peers and adults in schools and through participation in school activities seemed especially relevant to the isolation and alienation that I believed justice-involved youth encountered when they returned to school.

### **Justice-Involved Youth and School Reentry Literature Search**

My search through databases for justice-involved youth and school reentry proved to be initially overwhelming. For example, a Google Scholar search using the terms “justice involved youth” and “school reentry” generated 33,300 results. These search terms produced literature from across multiple major and minor disciplines, including psychology, sociology, criminology, penology, and correctional education. Using more specific terms such as “juvenile delinquent,” “juvenile delinquency,” “justice-involved youth,” “school,” “reentry,” and “return” in various combinations with a restricted publication window (articles published since 2010) and search filters (peer-reviewed academic journals, books and book chapters, conference papers and presentations) individually and in various combinations produced limited results in databases (4

articles in Academic Search Complete) but more useful results in public search engines (73 articles in Google Scholar). In an effort to achieve a balance between the results returned by Google Scholar and the limited results returned by scholarly databases, I continually refined search terms to capture relevant articles, and I consulted existing literature reviews for further guidance.

I adopted two primary exclusion criteria for school reentry literature search. First, I excluded articles that examined school reentry in other countries. I chose this exclusionary criteria because the relationship between juvenile justice and education tends to be country-specific. For example, the relationship between the US juvenile justice and education systems arises from historical, social, political, racial, and economic factors, including differing federal and state legal and regulatory requirements imposed on schools to facilitate reentry of justice-involved youth. Second, I also limited the search to studies that examined secondary students (grades 6-12) as their study populations because age is a factor in juvenile adjudication. Ultimately, my literature search and granular review identified a smaller pool of relevant articles than I had anticipated. The articles I had identified consisted of policy papers as well as quantitative and qualitative research reports and covered works published between 1994 and 2012. All articles published after 2012 that I identified as having a relationship to justice-involved youth and school reentry consisted of dissertations and theses, lacked peer review, had limited utility, or examined a non-US population.

After I had completed my literature review and began data collection, I periodically revisited my school reentry search with new terms generated from interviews with study participants. This practice led me to identify a systematic literature review (Kubek et al., 2020) that compiled research reports examining school reentry practices for justice-involved youth. I

compared the articles that I had collected against the articles identified in Kubek et al.'s (2020) review, identified one additional article – Sinclair, Unruh, and Griller Clark (2016) – that met my inclusion criteria, and incorporated it into my literature review.

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Empirical Studies**

Labeling, social control, and field theories provide a framework that describes the process of identification, isolation, and alienation that justice-involved youth undergo during their reentry to public and alternative schools. Field theory describes the institutional factors and processes that lead to social reproduction that occurs in schools, but it does not address the mechanisms that school personnel as institutional agents deploy to enforce the rules of the field, penalize dishonored individuals within the field, and enforce rule compliance and acceptance. Labeling theory and social control theory close the gaps left by field theory. Labeling theory describes the process of classification, stigmatization, isolation, and alienation that justice-involved youth encounter before, during, and after school reentry. Social control theory describes the isolation from academic, extracurricular, and social activities and opportunities that school personnel as institutional agents impose on justice-involved youth. Taken together, labeling, social control, and field theories present a comprehensive description of the mechanisms that exclude justice-involved youth from school and deny them access to social, economic, and cultural capitals conveyed through education. The following section describes the origins and elements of labeling, social control, and field theories and identifies relevant research incorporating these theoretical frameworks.

#### **Field Theory: Conflict, Capital, and Control**

A discussion of field theory must first begin with a broad conceptualization of social, cultural, and economic capitals, which are often characterized as tangible and intangible

resources that contribute to an individual's successful navigation of society's institutions or fields. Schools as social stratification and reproduction systems not only recognize (or "ordain") existing social, cultural, and economic capital but also facilitate access to future social, cultural, and economic capitals. In their roles as sorting systems for an economically, socially, and racially stratified society, schools through school personnel as institutional agents control access to capital embodied in the educational benefits that they grant or deny students. As Scott (2012) describes it, schools primarily serve privileged collectivities and ordain existing capitals possessed by these collectivities:

Schooling privileges communication and knowledge, making it a powerful legitimizing social institution. However, the privileged communication and knowledge is completely arbitrary, depending on what those in control deem important, and accordingly, what communication and knowledge favors the reproduction of their own privilege. (p. 532)

Pinxten and Lievens (2014) also characterize field theory as applied to education as a theory of privilege, not of inadequacy, for it "stresses the resources that people have and not the resources they lack" (p. 1097). Barrett and Martina (2012) also note the role education plays in reproducing and reinforcing inequities:

While appearing neutral, the education system is implicated in the reproduction of social inequality as it tends to reproduce the structure and distribution of capital among the classes "in that the culture which it transmits is closer to the dominant culture and that the mode of inculcation to which it has recourse is less removed from the mode of inculcation practiced by the [dominant-class] family". (p. 251)

In essence, field theory describes how the social fields comprising society stratify and reproduce inequalities through institutions and institutional agents. In the field of education, schools ordain

dominant class members' existing capitals based on values the education field assigns to these capitals and grant dominant class members' children access to future capitals based on their ability to deploy their existing ordained capital to demonstrate understanding of the field rules. In other words, schools grant educational benefits to children drawn from dominant classes because dominant classes have encoded the rules in ordained capitals that are required to successfully navigate the field; thus, children drawn from dominant classes possess capitals that schools as fields recognize and ordain through their institutional agents. Stanton-Salazar (2011) describes the control that institutional agents as enforcers for fields have over the benefits received by a field's privileged members:

Within the social worlds outside the family, the proficient execution of the sanctioned discourse and identities, in the context of relationships with authority figures, socialization agents, and institutional agents, translates into access to an array of resources, privileges, and rewards. The point to be made here is that learning multiple discourses and participating in distinct, nonfamilial sociocultural worlds, in preparation for adulthood, requires active engagement with various agents within each of these worlds. (p. 1069)

Unlike their privileged (or honored) peers in schools, justice-involved youth lack ordained (or ordainable) social, cultural, and economic capitals. Thus, they cannot effectively negotiate schools as fields without these recognizable social currencies that demonstrate their right to access educational benefits as honored members of the field. The disempowered positions that they hold as dishonored, stigmatized individuals further limit their ability to ordain capitals and access future capitals that schools grant to honored members of the field through educational benefits.

When justice-involved youth reenter public and alternative schools as dishonored members of the field, they encounter a secondary sanctioning effect in the form of active and passive resistance to their efforts to pursue future social, cultural, and economic capital through educational benefits embodied in prosocial relationships, academic achievements, and extracurricular activities. In essence, the educational benefits that they had accessed prior to their juvenile justice system contact no longer exist for them.

Bourdieu's (1990) field theory with its conceptualizations of cultural, social, and economic capitals, fields, and habitus provides insight into the environment justice-involved youth encounter during their reentry to community and alternative schools. While Bourdieu's (1990) conceptualizations of fields, capital, and habitus play their parts in the reentry process for justice-involved youth, the conceptualization of capitals as educational benefits that youth access through the relationships that they build with school personnel and peers and the achievements that they unlock in schools has a crucial relationship to labeling and social control theories and provides insight into the role schools play in creating and perpetuating institutionally imposed and approved inequities. As Edgerton and Roberts (2014) note: "Bourdieu contended that the formal education system is a primary mechanism in the perpetuation of socioeconomic inequality, as it serves to legitimate the existing social hierarchy by transforming it into an apparent hierarchy of gifts or merit" (p. 193). In other words, schools reward the possession of ordained capitals, not only merit, in determining who to provide access to educational benefits to further ordain existing capitals and create access to future capitals.

### ***Origin and Theoretical Framework***

The four components most often associated with field theory are symbolic violence, fields, habitus, and capitals. This section will explore these four components and position them

in relation to this study's theoretical framework describing the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth.

**Symbolic Violence as Control Mechanism.** The mechanism for control in field theory arises from symbolic violence, which is “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). As an extension of symbolic power, symbolic violence describes the interaction of habitus and fields in a social stratification and reproduction process in which both dominant and dominated individuals willingly, though unknowingly, participate. Scott (2012) describes the process as follows:

In this way, symbolic power, and the violence it symbolically produces, is a mode of dominance that helps legitimize an already existing social structure founded on and strengthened by social inequality. It is a reproductive force of what are already everyday practices in our social world—practices not necessarily recognized as problematic or dominating, and practices not often not questioned. (p. 532)

But symbolic violence cannot accomplish social stratification and reproduction without habitus and fields. Habitus (or an individual's disposition toward deployment of available ordained capitals) arises from the social space into which an individual is born, while fields define the social spaces through which an individual passes. Misrecognition, which Bourdieu described as the process of accepting symbolic violence without recognizing it as a form of violence, encourages dominated groups to function within their habitus and fields without questioning the rules of the social space. Scott (2012) connects symbolic violence to two other essential components of field theory: fields and habitus. She writes:

An essential characteristic of symbolic violence is misrecognition, which occurs when those who are dominated in social, political, and economic practices become complicit in

their own dominance by failing to recognize the true nature of their positioning in (and relationship to) dominating structures. This misrecognition is played out in the habitus... that affect the ways we think and behave. (p. 532)

Scott (2012) adds that habitus, field, and misrecognition are the components of symbolic violence that lead to acceptance of the social order despite its inherent inequities. Symbolic violence is the mechanism that encourages school personnel, as institutional agents serving the field, to enforce rules of the field against justice-involved youth. In turn, justice-involved youth, as dishonored trespassers traversing the field, accept the inequities that they experience.

**Fields as Arenas of Conflict.** The conceptualization of fields lies at the heart of Bourdieu's field theory. The function of fields in social stratification and reproduction arises from Bourdieu's and Coleman's work in the 1980s. Bourdieu (1986) believed that effective social analysis should focus on the relationships among different fields (such as education) and the mechanisms that reproduce these relationships because the fields exist not to serve individuals by placing them into preordained positions, though that occurs, but to maintain a field's existence and relationships with other fields (Wacquant, 1993).

A field has two purposes: defining rules for the "game" of social stratification and reproduction and creating a space in which the game takes place (Horvat, 2003). Under a field's function as a rulemaking system, it defines "the formal and informal norms governing a particular social sphere of activity (e.g. family, public school, higher education, art, politics, and economics)" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 195). Bourdieu also intended for field to imply a battlefield or playing field on which "individuals who confront one another will enter into conflict or competition with one another, each from a more or less advantageous position (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp. 16-18)" (Weininger, 2005, p. 137).

Because a field functions as an arena for symbolic conflict, it rewards dispositions that align with its rules and punishes dispositions that deviate from its rules (Scott, 2012). This self-regulating and self-perpetuating cycle of conflict and control results in the group that holds the field gaining dominance over the rules of the field and its valuation of capitals:

A field is simultaneously a space of conflict and competition...in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it...and the power to decree the hierarchy and “conversion rates” between all forms of authority in the field of power. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17-18)

But the struggle to control the field is not a struggle among equals, for the dominant group will change the rules or introduce new rules to perpetuate the existing social order, thus depriving dominated groups from the opportunity to control the field (Horvat, 2003). Edgerton and Roberts (2014) describe this conflict among groups to control the field:

Fields are relational in nature and are characterized by their own particular regulative principles – the “rules of the game” or “logic of practice” – which are subject to power struggles among different interests seeking to control the capital (and “rules”) in that field. (p. 195)

The field of education plays a significant role in rewarding and punishing dispositions, with students who have greater knowledge of the field of education’s rules more likely to succeed in the conflict for access to capitals controlled by the field.

[S]ome students enter the school system with greater “readiness to learn”, or in terms of the present discussion, they experience greater habitus-field congruence: they have the set of cognitive and behavioral dispositions conducive to the scholastic performances recognized as academic achievement by the school. (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 209)

Applying Bourdieu's theory of fields to this study reveals that the field of education exists in relationship with the field of juvenile justice, leading both fields to reinforce each other through their classification and treatment of justice-involved youth. The apparatus of education through its credentialing power and the apparatus of juvenile justice through its classification power both wield immense influence as state-controlled social institutions.

[T]hat the state, and it alone, retains the legitimate right to impose classificatory principles which enjoy a compulsory validity, or (as in the case of schools and the credentials they issue) to at least adjudicate the validity of all such principles. ... On the one hand, the state can inscribe a set of categorizations into the social order that, as a result of their obligatory character, restrict the room for maneuver open to social actors. (see Bourdieu 1990b, pp.136-137). (Weininger, 2005, p. 149)

This process creates a revolving door between the fields of education and juvenile justice with justice-involved youth passing back and forth between them as each system reinforces the other through the capitals they ordain and the positions they assign to the justice-involved youth who remain trapped in the endless cycle that the complementary relationship between the two systems creates.

**Habitus as Orientation to the World.** The concept of habitus (or disposition) embodies the complex formal and informal rules of action and interaction individuals acquire through family, neighborhood, community, and school socialization. Bourdieu (1990) defined habitus as:

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without

presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (p. 53)

In other words, it “is the learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world... rooted in family upbringing (socialization within the family) and conditioned by one’s position in the social structure” (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 195). Habitus formation begins early, with family members and other influential individuals contributing to the formation of a child’s habitus, shaping it to mirror their own perceived positions in social space and their own lifestyles (Pinxten & Lievens, 2014). Race, ethnicity, geography, gender, and other factors of an individual’s social condition also contribute to habitus formation (Horvat, 2003).

In addition to generating unconscious rules of engagement for interaction within and between the social spaces demarcated by fields, habitus shapes the life courses individuals may pursue through the recognition and reactions their habitus inspires in others. These reactions either facilitate or deny admission to fields and to collectivities within fields, further perpetuating the inequities perpetuated by fields, habitus, and capitals:

Bourdieu’s concept of social reproduction focuses on the differential socialization of individuals coming from different social classes. This socialization provides children with a sense of what is comfortable or natural—what Bourdieu calls “habitus”. ... In both cases cultural and social resources are the necessary “passwords” to succeed in the selection process for elite status. (Tramonte & Willms, 2010, p. 202)

Horvat (2003) describes habitus as a mechanism not only for defining individuals’ current positions in social spaces but also for limiting their future life courses into future social spaces. She writes: “The habitus is the mechanism by which individuals develop a sense of their place in

the world and the availability or accessibility of a variety of social worlds. It represents an individual's internalization of possibility" (p. 7).

Habitus acts as a subconscious autopilot, suggesting appropriate responses to interactions within a field from among the existing reservoir of responses acquired through social conditionings. The role habitus plays as an "internalized interpretation of societal rules" (Horvat, 2003, p. 6) influences decision-making on a preconscious level; however, an event or situation that defies the programmed responses embedded in an individual's acquired habitus triggers a more conscious response. "The habitus operates primarily in the background until the actor is faced with circumstances – a sufficient degree of habitus-field disjuncture – that may bring conscious deliberative action to the fore" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 200). Even though interactions take place below the threshold of awareness, Bourdieu also believed that unexpected events that defied successful application of the existing habitus triggered a more engaged, conscious response (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Even a crisis cannot alter the life course that created the existing habitus, for the habitus still restricts conscious actions to those with which the individual possesses some familiarity or comfort. In Weininger's (2005) interpretation, crises that push individuals beyond the subconscious rules of their habitus leave them unable to act. He writes:

These schemes enable actors to apprehend their specific situation and its elements as meaningful, and to pursue – typically without reflection or calculation – a course of action which is "appropriate" to it. ... This capacity... is limited: the more the action situation departs from the conditions in which the habitus was constituted, the more likely it is that the habitus will be rendered ineffective (a kind of individual anomie).  
(Weininger, 2005, p. 132)

In short, an individual's habitus defines both possibilities and limitations. When individuals confront a conflict for which an existing habitus fails to provide guidance, they find themselves unable to respond to events and situations beyond the rules inscribed into their existing habitus.

Bourdieu further believed that dishonored individuals who lack access to ordained social, cultural, and economic capital acquiesce to their domination in order to tolerate the marginalization imposed on them. Bourdieu described a bleak view of the acceptance dominated groups and dishonored individuals have for their domination: “[Intellectuals] forget that the dominated are socialized by the very conditions in which they live and that they are therefore often determined – to varying degrees – to accommodate to their situation, lest the world be totally unlivable to them” (Wacquant, 1993, p. 35). Horvat (2003) also viewed habitus as the means through which dominated classes and dishonored individuals come to accept their positions in the social structure and contribute to their own domination through their unknowing acquiescence to the habitus they unconsciously assimilate. She writes:

It is the habituated notions that lie beneath the consciousness of dominated individuals and groups of individuals that allow them to accept without question the “natural order.”  
 ...Symbolic violence is made possible by the fact that the dominated do not recognize their domination but rather practice habituated actions that perpetuate it. (Horvat, 2003, p. 6)

The juvenile justice system contributes to social stratification through the status it imposes on the youth it adjudicates. Unlike other social statuses that arise through the influences of habitus or associations within a field, the dishonored statuses assigned to justice-involved youth stemming from their juvenile justice system contact bears official state approval and is subject to

enforcement beyond the subtle or overt pressures typically deployed to encourage compliance within fields. As Weininger (2005) characterizes it:

[L]aw is interpreted, applied, and typically produced by a body of specially trained experts, and these processes are restricted to an institutional arena in which issues of coherence and consistency are paramount. It thus attains the fully formalized status of a code (Bourdieu 1990b, pp. 79-80), and exhibits a maximum of precision. Furthermore, legal boundaries are enforceable, with transgressions subject to sanction by an “official” agency—that is, a branch of the state. (p. 149)

In short, habitus represents the union of an individual’s history and past experiences in a structured, organized disposition toward responses that are devoid of overt control. A habitus of delinquency, isolation, and alienation so dominates the lives of justice-involved youth that they submit to their own domination through their entanglement with the juvenile justice system and the social stigma imposed on them arising from this entanglement. While some theorists propose that rational, logical choice drives individuals to engage in unlawful behavior, Berg, Sevell, and Stewart (2016) argue that Bourdieu’s concept of habitus explains the automatic responses associated with delinquent behavior, which offers insight into the phenomenon this study examined.

The conceptualization of habitus has significance in this study, for it describes how the experiences justice-involved youth encounter during school reentry contribute to the habitus (or dispositions) they develop. The dominated habitus that they acquire seemingly arises from the stigma school personnel as institutional agents assign to them in a process that treats them as dishonored individuals relegated to a social underclass unworthy of full participation in the school field.

**Capitals and Educational Benefits.** Bourdieu (1986) described three fundamental forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. He suggested that each capital assists individuals navigate society through a process in which society ordains capitals, individuals accumulate ordained capitals, and reservoirs of ordained capital open paths to higher positions within fields. The distribution and control of capitals across occupations within fields determines social positions and defines interaction within and between fields, so those who control ordained capitals dominate a given field, define the value of capitals ordained or acquired, and perpetuate control of the field rules within their collectivities (Weininger, 2005). As Pinxten and Lievens (2014) note, capital determines an individual's social status, position, and power in relation to others within the field's social space. They write:

Bourdieu's concept of social position is relational, in that people's social position depends on their relationship to the position of others in social space. People with a similar amount and composition of the different forms of capital are closer together in social space, and this group of people consequently has the potential to become a social class. Possession of these forms of capital, furthermore, determines people's power position in specific fields. (p. 1097)

A capital's value also is not fixed but arises from the esteem placed in obtaining it or through the recognition those who control the field rules assign to its value. As Horvat (2003) notes: "All individuals have social capital to invest or activate in a variety of social settings or fields. However, all social or cultural capital does not have the same value in a given field" (p. 8). Grenfell (2009) described the exclusive access to ordained capitals that fields create for their members as an inequitable process that serves the function for which it inevitably arose:

*Capital* belongs to the *field* and it is the *field* that sets its value, but it is individuals who possess it. Although open to all, its distribution is by definition unequal – it would not perform its functional logic if it were not. (p. 20, emphasis in original)

In short, those who control the field create inequitable rules to determine which capitals have value through ordination, a value recognition and assignment mechanism. The field's institutional agents then serves as gatekeepers to bestow or withhold recognition and ordination of existing capitals and access to future ordained capitals.

The term “capital” as a construct to denote an individual's accumulation of cultural, social, or economic knowledge and resources has spread beyond Bourdieu's work and has come to represent a shorthand within the academy to describe valued resources hidden behind social and institutional barriers or withheld by institutional agents who serve as gatekeepers and enforcers. As Grenfell (2009) notes, Bourdieu never intended the term capital to be applied only to intangible accumulated resources as a limited “economic metaphor,” for capital exists as a link between fields and habitus:

For Bourdieu, Capital is the currency of the Field: it fuels its operations and defines what is included and excluded from it; it is the means by which field products and processes are valued and not valued; and defines how those present in the Field need to accrue status and/or power in order to exert control over it. (p. 19)

Grenfell (2009) describes the role capital plays in empowering and disempowering individuals to act through their habitus within existing fields based on the unwritten rules of the field and the value assigned to capitals. He writes: “Because capital is symbolic and derives its power from the attribution of recognition, it defines limits, what is and is not do-able, and thinkable, in terms of what is (and is not) recognised and rewarded” (p. 20).

Theorists have argued that Bourdieu's conceptualization of capitals lacks utility and have proposed different conceptualizations of social, cultural, and economic capitals to supplement Bourdieu's original conceptualization. For example, Vryonides (2007) defines social, cultural, and economic capitals as "the social products, both resources as well as rewards, of a field through which individuals carry out competitive social action" (p. 867). More specifically, social capital represents social networks, obligations, and relationships that confer "not only educational benefits but often facilitates the pursuit of social outcomes in the status attainment process" (p. 868). Cultural capital represents "legitimised knowledge present in a home environment, which allows parents and children to secure advantages from the educational process" (p. 868). Economic capital represents money, property, material objects, and the rights associated with these valuable resources.

***Cultural Capital.*** Researchers have approached conceptualization and operationalization of cultural capital in different ways. Reay's (2004) conceptualization of cultural capital draws heavily on Bourdieu's original purpose and intent. She describes cultural capital as existing in three forms – an embodied state in the mind of an individual arising from exposure to important cultural distinctions, an institutionalized state such as educational qualifications, and an objectified state manifested in cultural goods. Pinxten and Lievens (2014) also conceptualize cultural capital as existing in three states similar to Reay's conceptualization: "Cultural capital in the institutionalised state refers to educational attainment. Objectified cultural capital concerns the possession of cultural goods. The embodied or incorporated state refers to people's values, skills, knowledge and tastes" (p. 1099). Scott (2012) views cultural capital as a "socially determined" resource with its value set by dominant collectivities that unequally distribute it and

ordain it through “practices and pursuits” that support and reproduce existing power structures (p. 533). She writes:

Cultural capital can be leveraged to gain the relative and arbitrary constructs of what those in power consider to be rewards, advantages, privileges, experiences, options, etc., within a given field. And of course, those in power will already possess all or many of these. (Scott, 2012, p. 533)

Tramonte and Willms (2010) explain that possession of cultural capital, which they seem to conceptualize as a blend of knowledge, economic power, and social connection, leads to a process of inequitable access and outcomes:

[I]ndividuals possess different amounts of cultural capital which explains why some students meet school standards, are accepted at college, and finally achieve higher levels of education, and why other students do not. . . . Schools promote particular linguistic structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula. Children from higher SES families are already familiar with these social arrangements when they enter school, and therefore they do not perceive school as an intimidating place. (Tramonte & Willms, 2010, p. 201)

Tramonte and Willms (2010) connected habitus, capitals, and school environments in their explanation of the interaction that occurs among these factors within the education field, though they conceptualized cultural capital as a culmination of knowledge and economic power. They write:

Bourdieu’s concept of social reproduction focuses on the differential socialization of individuals coming from different social classes. This socialization provides children with a sense of what is comfortable or natural—what Bourdieu calls “habitus”. . . . In both cases cultural and social resources are the necessary “passwords” to succeed in the

selection process for elite status. The essence of cultural capital is that its effects are institutionalized...: schools are places where codes from higher socio-economic status groups are recognized and where the possession of cultural capital is rewarded. (p. 202)

***Social Capital.*** In contrast to cultural capital, social capital has proven to be easier to conceptualize and operationalize for researchers. Early and modern theories of capital share the conceptualization of the value social capital has to the individual as a facilitator to economic and social advancement. Unlike cultural capital, which runs in families, or economic capital, which can be acquired, social capital arises from social relationships among people and institutions. Plagens (2011) traces early references to social capital to Marx and Dewey who appear to have characterized it as a resource external to the individual that develops through relationships with others. Social capital lay dormant for decades in sociological research and theory but was resurrected in the 1960s and 1970s through Jacobs' (1961) controversial work on urban environments and Loury's (1977) work on racial inequalities. Interest in field theory surged in the 1980s and 1990s, which Plagens (2011) credits to Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), who he describes as creating the most refined theoretical frameworks that encompass the conceptualization of social capital as a resource generated through relationships with others. Lin (1999) defines social capital as "resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions" (p. 35), while Stanton-Salazar (2011) defines it as "resources and key forms of social support embedded in one's network or associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents" (p. 1067).

The resources embedded in the social relationships that give rise to social capital fall into four categories: the flow of information, influence on others, certification of social credentials, and reinforcement of entitlement (Lin, 1999). In both early and modern references to social

capital, access to or membership in a larger or more powerful social network creates more opportunities for economic and social advancement: “Individuals embedded in dense social networks have more resources at their disposal for achieving desired outcomes” (Plagens, 2011, p. 49). Pinxten and Lievens (2014) describe social capital as: “a network-based resource that is available in relationships and consequently accrues to individuals” (p. 1098). Social capital also serves as a source for valuable norms that shape and govern the social network’s shared conceptualization of right and wrong behavior of individuals in the social network. The social capital individuals accumulate arises from the network of relationships they create with others and includes economic, cultural, and symbolic capital available to those within the network.

Though Bourdieu was not the first to deploy the term “social capital,” he popularized its use in sociology, education, and other fields. Though conceptualizations of social capital have evolved, Bourdieu’s usage describes access to existing and future resources that manifest through social relationships that occur within groups whose members share common, recognized characteristics (Grenfell, 2009). Bourdieu (1986) argued that:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248-249)

In other words, social networks (or fields) exist as closed systems with access to significant ordained economic, cultural, and social capitals conferred on network members through their elite, restricted association. The social network becomes self-perpetuating, rewarding members

who comply with its rules and punishing or expelling members who resist assimilation. Coleman (1988) describes the role social networks play in rewarding their members:

[The] kinds of social structures that make possible social norms and the sanctions that enforce them do not benefit primarily the person or persons whose efforts would be necessary to bring them about, but benefit all those who are part of such a structure. (p. S116)

***Economic Capital.*** Unlike cultural and social capitals, economic capital has proven to be the least challenging for researchers to conceptualize and operationalize. Economic capital “refers to material assets that are ‘immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights’ (Bourdieu 1986: 242)” (Pinxten & Lievens, 2014, p. 1097).

### ***Schools, Fields, Habitus, and Capitals***

Social fields and the institutions that comprise them stratify and reproduce inequitable social classifications and opportunities through their contribution to habitus formation and reinforcement, control of rigid field and group boundaries, and existence as self-perpetuating systems.

[S]ocial institutions may possess the power to instate and regulate class- or fraction-constitutive boundaries characterized by a high degree of solidity and permanence, and may do so in independence from the classificatory schemes of the actors who are subject to categorization by them. Educational institutions, with the power to issue credentials, are Bourdieu’s preferred example. Insofar as they carry a more or less universally recognized value in the labor market, credentials institute an objective frontier between holders and non-holder. (Weininger, 2005, p. 148)

Schools and their institutional agents serve as sorting systems, assigning students to life courses presumptively on quantifiably neutral student characteristics such as merit, ability, and achievement; however, schools and their institutional agents also function as gatekeeping systems, promoting students to higher levels of academic achievement or demoting them to a social and economic underclass comprised of dishonored individuals without ordained capitals (Reay, 2004). As Reay (2004) noted, schools encourage opportunities for those who already possess ordained capital and understand the rules of the field:

Possession of economic, cultural, and social capitals, and “a feel for the game” generated by middle-class habitus, mean their families are engaging in a range of exclusive and exclusionary practices that provide their offspring with real as opposed to the illusory choices of their working-class counterparts. (Reay, 2004, p. 79)

In other words, schools as fields perpetuate the concentration of social, cultural, and economic capitals in the hands of those who already possess it. Justice-involved youth reentering schools often lack ordained family social, cultural, and economic capitals necessary to ease their reentry, so they do not have access to the safety net protecting youth who have ordained family capitals. Bourdieu (1986) described it thus: “This typically functionalist definition of the functions of education ignores the contribution which the educational system makes to the reproduction of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (p. 244). Bourdieu (1986) also explained that schools confer educational benefits on students who possess ordained capitals through academic achievements and educational attainment often denied to students who lack ordained capitals.

The cultural capital embodied in the academic credentials students obtain has an exchange value with social and economic capitals; however, social capital precedes and

facilitates the acquisition of cultural and economic capitals. In schools, social capital arises from the relationships among the school community – students, teachers, parents, coaches, administrators, and other adults associated with the school (Plagens, 2011). School personnel as institutional agents and formal and informal school policies and practices regulate and control access to different capitals through prosocial relationships and activities (social capital) and academic achievement and educational attainment (economic capital).

If all things were equal in schools, the dyadic relationship between teacher and student would ensure that the social and cultural capital selectively valued and rewarded by the mainstream education system would be equally available to all students. However, this is not currently the case. . . .the establishment of educationally-instrumental relationships can be complicated by differences of race, class and status between teachers and students, thus decreasing the likelihood that these students might encounter and establish relationships with caring teachers who are cognizant of their role as sources of educationally-instrumental social and cultural capital. (Barrett & Martina, 2012, p. 254)

As social classification systems, schools employ institutional agents to control access to higher social statuses for students who carry stigmatizing labels; form incomplete bonds with their schools; or lack ordainable social, cultural, and economic capital. Domina, Penner, and Penner (2017) examined this limiting function that schools and school personnel serve in their application of the theory of categorical inequality to education and argued that schools intentionally socially stratify students. They write: “Schools play an important role in determining which positions specific individuals occupy in unequal societies, as well as in determining and legitimating the social distance between these positions” (2017, p. 2). In contrast to a school’s perceived purpose as an institution providing a public good through equal

opportunities available to all students based on merit, ability, and effort, schools serve as complex social sorting systems for students and assign them to inequitable societal positions. Domina, Penner, and Penner (2017) write: “But well before schools issue credentials, they create meaningful social categories by deciding which students to enroll and by repeatedly sorting students into age grades, ability groups, and instructional tracks, among other formal and informal groups” (p. 3). This sorting process leaves students with some degree of agency to redefine their positions in the field through achievement and merit, but justice-involved youth face more limited agency to operate within the field. The dishonored statuses imposed on them carries stigmas that isolates them from beneficial school relationships and bonds and leads to their alienation from school communities and the educational benefits available to their peers.

**Schools as Powerful Social Institutions.** Schools serve as one of the most powerful and influential institutions in Bourdieu’s field theory, for they contribute to habitus formation, ordain capitals, and control social advancement; however, their most significant role in field theory arises from the misrecognition they encourage by fostering the belief that only merit and ability, not possession of ordained capitals, determine school success. As Scott (2012) describes it:

[A] meritocratic schooling system actively disguises the relationship between education and economics by insisting that individual merit and work ethic form the basis of symbolic educational success. . . . In terms of misrecognition, a meritocratic system makes it easier to gently shift the discourse of unequal opportunity and its relationship to economics to the value of personal diligence and work ethic and their connection with competition in a capitalist economy. (p. 533)

Misrecognition’s function in perpetuating inequities in education blames the victims of inequities for education’s disparate treatment. Schools as institutions within the field of education and

school personnel as institutional agents enforcing the rules of the field deprive the most vulnerable, marginalized youth of the opportunities they need to succeed. As Barrett and Martina (2012) write: “For many students, perhaps especially those from non-mainstream backgrounds, success in school often depends largely on the formation of genuinely supportive relationships with peer and adult institutional agents who can provide access to these forms of capital” (p. 253). Overcoming the dishonored status stigmatization imposes to achieve access to present and future social, cultural, and economic capitals following school reentry might prove to be almost impossible for justice-involved youth, for they are far more likely to experience isolation and alienation than they are to experience reintegration and reconciliation within the school community.

Access to present and future ordained capitals hinges on successful navigation of schools as the fields in which habitus and ordained capitals determine opportunities to pursue future capitals. Parcel and Dufur (2001) likened school social capital to home social capital and emphasized the importance both sources of capital have to learning. They write: “Just as home environment is a form of social capital that can enhance children’s learning, school environments reflect the social ties and interactive styles embedded in the schools, also enhancing learning” (p. 885). Without the ability to activate or accumulate present and future ordained social, cultural, and economic capitals, justice-involved youth find themselves alienated from the school and school personnel who control access to educational benefits, a key path to future ordained capitals.

In the field of education, schools determine which capitals are ordained and which capitals are not, resulting in inequitable access to educational benefits and inequitable educational outcomes. Students who arrive at school with ordained or ordainable capital not only

possess capital in the form of knowledge and behavior needed to navigate the field but also add to their reserves of capitals and unlock opportunities to pursue future capitals.

**School Personnel as Institutional Agents.** School personnel such as teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, and staff serve as institutional agents for schools and support their function as reproductive institutions for social and economic inequalities. The institutional agents act as enforcers of formal and informal school rules and gatekeepers to educational benefits. Stanton-Salazar (2011) describes the relationship institutional agents have to the institution they serve:

*An institutional agent can be defined as an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status, either within a society or in an institution (or an organization). Thus, such an individual is accustomed to occupying positions of status and of authority, and managing and accessing highly valued resources, exercising key forms of power, and mobilizing his or her reputation in purposive action. ... The individual's or actor's potential role as "institutional agent" becomes manifest when, on behalf of another, he or she acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued institutional support, defined for now in terms of those resources, opportunities, privileges, and services which are highly valued, yet differentially allocated within any organization or society that is invested in social inequality and in hierarchical forms of control and organization. (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075-1076, emphasis in original)*

School personnel enforce the formal and informal rules of the field to control access to "resources, opportunities, privileges, and services" that schools, as institutions in the field of education, grant or deny students. As institutional agents, school personnel are both victims and

perpetrators of symbolic violence, for they misrecognize the symbolic violence schools as institutions commit against them and which they, in turn, perpetuate against dishonored students. Scott (2012) describes the relationship that misrecognition has to school personnel as enforcers and victims of symbolic violence in their role as institutional agents:

[M]isrecognition is the linchpin in solidifying an amenable relationship between the dominant and the dominated, the haves and have-nots, the powerful and the power-deprived...between the institution of schooling and the teacher compelled to work within this system. (Scott, 2012, p. 532).

School personnel serve a school's social reproductive function by enforcing the rules that ordain existing capitals and providing access to future ordained capitals through educational benefits. Stanton-Salazar (2011) explains the unconscious enforcement role that school personnel adopt as institutional agents who selectively reward students who possess properly ordained capitals:

In the context of the school and its social structures, teachers and school personnel, usually in an unconscious and uncritical manner, regularly gravitate toward and reward those students (e.g., grades, knowledge funds) who exhibit high-status social characteristics (race, gender, class background), and who successfully exercises the proper *discourse* [or display the right *cultural capital*]*—*thus, signaling the student's internalization of the school's total *socialization agenda*... .(Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1084)

Stanton-Salazar redefines social capital to describe the control institutional agents have over it within existing networks and to identify the role relationships with institutional agents have to its access. He conceptualized it as: "resources and key forms of social support embedded in one's network or associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents"

(Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1067). This conceptualization of social capital as a resource created and controlled through social relationships administered by institutional agents within fields has direct application to this study, for it describes the benefits the field of education grants through its institutional agents to honored groups and individuals and denies to dishonored groups and individuals. Through this process, schools and school personnel as institutional agents reproduce existing societal structures by imposing a habitus that aligns with existing social castes, ordaining dominant capitals that the field designates as valuable, and devaluing subordinate capitals that the field designates as inferior. In accordance with the field of education's rules, institutional agents determine which capitals to ordain and who may participate in the ordination, accumulation, and exchange of ordained capitals. In their roles as gatekeepers and arbitrators, school personnel as institutional agents perpetuate existing social hierarchies.

Field theory describes the school as a field of social reproduction that relies on formal and informal labeling and social control enforced by school personnel as institutional agents. Justice-involved youth receive stigmatizing labels that impose on them a dishonored status, encounter secondary sanctions that hinder their relationship formation with school personnel and peers, and lose access to present and future ordained social, cultural, and economic capitals due to their isolation and alienation. Instead of achieving reintegration and reconciliation, justice-involved youth reenter schools as trespassers into an unwelcoming social field and physical space (a school) that demands that they adopt the dispositions of a dominated, dishonored underclass with little or no hope for acceptance or reacceptance into the social order. They are ultimately denied ordination of social, cultural, and economic capitals and access to future capitals embodied in educational benefits.

### ***Research Examining Field Theory, Delinquency, and Schools***

Researchers have examined the crucial role capital plays in discouraging delinquent behavior and encouraging academic success. The studies in this section examine the relationships among capital, delinquent behavior, school bonding, prosocial behavior, and academic outcomes. In this section, researchers have applied social capital to their investigations, but their conceptualizations of social capital often share characteristics with conceptualizations of economic and cultural capitals and with elements of social control theory.

Crosnoe (2004) examined the relationships among family and school social capital and academic achievement. The study drew on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which was an ongoing study of adolescents who were in grades 7-12 in 1994. The study included survey responses and in-home interview responses drawn from 11,927 students. Response data were aggregated and analyzed across multiple scales, including academic achievement, parent-adolescent emotional distance, student-teacher bonding in school, parent-adolescent relations in school, parent educational attainment in school, individual level controls, and school level controls. Study findings suggested that close relationships with teachers facilitated the transfer of social capital to students and correlated with better student academic outcomes. Students who came from families with high levels of existing social capital also benefitted from the social capital at school, but school social capital failed to compensate for low social capital in families. This finding contradicted Crosnoe's (2004) anticipated outcome:

This overlap was expected to be compensatory – with social capital in the school promoting educational resilience for youth from more problematic family environments by countering the academic risks of their emotionally distant relationships with parents – but this was not the case. (p. 277)

He further concluded that schools exacerbate inequality through the control they exert over access to social capital: “[T]he schooling system can actually widen various aspects of social inequality related to the family sphere through selection and socialization. . . . the educational system contributes to the process of cumulative advantage or disadvantage” (Crosnoe, 2004, p. 277). Crosnoe’s conclusion that schools exacerbate existing inequalities for youth who lack family social capital illustrates how school personnel as institutional agents control access to school-based capital, which has significance to this study because justice-involved youth often lack access to family capital. Their exclusion from school capitals further exacerbates the inequalities that they often face.

Drawing on data from a subsample of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wright, and Fitzpatrick (2006) examined the relationships among sources of social capital and violence-related outcomes among 4,834 youth in grades 7-12 in 80 high schools and 52 middle schools. They considered family, school, and neighborhood social capitals, which they defined as “resources embedded in social relationships and ties” (p. 1435) that provide access to more resources such as employment opportunities (economic capital). Their definition also included elements such as behavioral frames of reference and reinforcements and consequences for behavior, which draws heavily from social control theory. They theorized that strong connections to social groups in families, schools, and neighborhoods provided youth with access to capitals, which, in turn, reduced violence-related outcomes. They also recommended that schools place more emphasis on socialization and academics to create a safer, more stable education environment. They wrote: “School affiliation also was consistently associated with lower incidences of violent outcomes for adolescents. Part of improving a school’s ability to insulate students from violence involves emphasizing socialization processes and curriculum-

based academic achievement” (2006, p. 1448). They also identified an unusual relationship between extracurricular activities and school violence, with data analysis indicating that participation in sports and clubs in school resulted in greater violence; however, they theorized that athletes might have misinterpreted definitions of violence or that the dense social ties within teams and clubs might have resulted in violence from or against non-group members.

Hoffmann and Dufur (2008) examined how school and family capitals interacted to affect delinquent behavior in youth. They used data from the National Education Longitudinal Study and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and limited the sampling frame to 7,991 ninth through twelfth grade students in 142 schools. They concluded that teachers, administrators, and volunteers provided access to capital in “high-quality” schools that embodied a sense of belonging and that this access compensated for low parent-child attachment and involvement. They recommended policy and practice changes to reduce delinquent behavior through access to more capital in schools for students who had limited family capital. They wrote: “[U]nderstanding the role of substitutionary school resources and capital may underscore a feasible policy tool for affecting delinquency, as schools that build a sense of community and interpersonal trust provide an environment that decreases the risk of delinquency” (Hoffmann & Dufur, 2008, p. 51). Their findings suggesting that access to social capital in schools compensated for limited access to social capital in families contradicted Crosnoe’s (2004) earlier findings that greater school social capital did not offset lesser family social capital.

In a study examining how family and school capitals promote positive socialization in first through eighth grade students, Dufur, Parcel, and McKune (2008) analyzed data drawn from the Mother-Child Data set of the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health compiled by the Center for Human Resource Research (CHRR). Their sampling frame included 1,833

participants attending 1,802 schools. They conceptualized social capital as: “investments between students and schools that can facilitate positive outcomes. These bonds can reflect community ties, but typically refer to the relationships that parents and children form with schoolteachers and personnel” (Dufur, Parcel, & McKune, 2008, p. 147). Their social capital conceptualization shares characteristics with social control theory and demonstrates the close relationship between social control and field theories. They suggested that students who received greater social capital investments from family members at home and from peers, teachers, and other adults at school would exhibit greater commitment to prosocial behaviors. They wrote: “When children spend half of their waking hours in school, they create ties that, while perhaps not as powerful as their relationships with their family members, accrue a considerable amount of social capital” (Dufur, Parcel, & McKune, 2008, p. 148). Their findings also suggested that family social capital was a stronger predictor of prosocial adjustment and that school social capital had a negligible influence on prosocial behavior; however, they cautioned that the sample’s age range (5-14 years old) might have increased the effect of family social capital because, in their view, younger children have stronger bonds to family than school.

Using a definition of social capital that overlapped with elements from social control theory, Dufur et al. (2015) evaluated the effects social capital at home and in school had on delinquent behavior. They theorized that the social capital students acquired through bonds with family and schools encouraged students to adopt norms that discouraged delinquent behavior and created obligations to teachers and schools to engage in prosocial behavior. The researchers speculated that the relationships that students built through engagement in academic and extracurricular activities with school personnel and peers helped them develop prosocial skills and positive behaviors, both of which they believe had a negative relationship to delinquent

behavior. To create a measurable variable, the researchers operationalized school social capital as representing the “interpersonal investments between students and schools that can facilitate positive outcomes” (p. 513). They reviewed school, home, peer, and parental questionnaire responses from 8,100 participants in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health collected during the 1994-95 school year. They found that family social capital exerted a more significant negative effect on delinquency than school social capital, but the role that schools play in socialization efforts increases as youth progress from elementary to middle to high school. They theorized that older students replaced family bonds with school bonds, writing: “This suggests that schools become more important in socialization efforts as children age and make more intense connections with school activities and personnel” (p. 522). Their findings suggest that students come to rely more on schools as a source of social capital as they gain independence from their families and establish more school-based relationships and bonds.

**Social Capital and Social Control Similarities.** Operationalizing the elements of field theory, especially the conceptualizations of social, cultural, and economic capitals, creates a nexus between field theory and social control theory, with some researchers combining elements of the theories. Wright and Fitzpatrick’s (2006) description of social capital reveals the close relationship it has to social control theory:

In sum, social capital – in the form of relationship-embedded resources – is accessed through formal and informal associations with members of family, school and neighborhood environments. These webs of social ties provide a normative frame of reference for behaviors, providing standards of expectation that include approval or disapproval for certain actions or activities. The result is effective and reciprocal trust and social control among those who are connected. (p. 1439)

Wright and Fitzpatrick's (2006) "web of social ties" created through relationships with school personnel grant youth access to ordained present and future social, cultural, and economic capitals obtained through educational benefits. These relationships encourage students to adopt formal and informal rules of prosocial behavior recognized and rewarded by the field; recognition by the field and its institutional agents also ordains present and social, cultural, and economic capitals and grants access to future ordained capitals.

### *Summary*

Field theory contributes to this study's theoretical framework examining the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth. Research suggests that school-derived capital arising from relationships with school personnel and peers contributes to adolescent prosocial behavior. In addition, research also suggests that limited family capitals – and limited opportunities to pursue ordained capitals through educational benefits – likely correlate to school reentry challenges. Students who have reservoirs of ordained family capitals may invest these resources to increase their academic success, engage in extracurricular activities, and satisfy gatekeepers and gatekeeping mechanisms, thus ensuring access to additional present and future ordained capitals. As Wright and Fitzpatrick (2006) observed, exchanging existing ordained capitals for access to relationships with school personnel and peers as well as school-based bonding opportunities not only increases access to future ordained capitals but also reduces delinquent behavior. They write: "[D]isengaged adolescents frequently lack access to important social capital embedded in constructive interpersonal relationships with teachers and fellow students, putting them at greater risk for engaging in violent behaviors" (p. 1437-1438).

Few youth are more disengaged than justice-involved youth undergoing school reentry. Their incomplete, broken, or nonexistent relationships with school personnel and peers isolate

them from opportunities to ordain the limited capitals that they already possess. They also are denied opportunities to acquire future capitals through educational benefits that schools bestow or withhold. Thus, they suffer from a paradox of deprivation, for without existing ordained social, cultural, and economic capitals, they lack the resources necessary to compete in the field, negotiate capital ordination, and activate access to future social, cultural, and economic capitals.

### **Labeling Theory: Categorization, Stigmatization, Isolation, and Alienation**

Labeling theory contributes to this study's theoretical framework in its description of the process individuals undergo when institutions and institutional agents assign them stigmatizing markers that define them as deviant outsiders in a social space (Becker, 1963). For justice-involved youth, their government-assigned and -sanctioned statuses as "juvenile delinquents" define their internally perceived and externally manifested selves and influence interactions with others. Marsh and Noguera (2018) suggest that stigmatization, isolation, and alienation in schools result from the labels attached to marginalized individuals and groups such as justice-involved youth:

[T]he practice of labeling has been associated with an evaluative process that results in the assignment of a categorical diagnostic term (e.g., slow, incorrigible, disruptive, etc.). For this reason, labeling has frequently been associated with stigmatizing, isolating and marginalizing individuals with assumed or real learning, behavioral or physical differences. (p. 448)

Labeling theory's explanation of the stigmatization experienced by vulnerable, marginalized individuals and groups offers insight into the isolation and alienation that justice-involved youth often encounter during their school reentry.

### ***Origin and Theoretical Framework***

Scholars attribute labeling theory to Tannenbaum's 1938 work, *Crime and the Community* (Rosenberg, 2010). Labeling theory (also known as societal reaction theory) remained dormant for over two decades but achieved recognition during the 1960s as a means to describe the development of criminogenic behavior. The theory fell out of favor during the 1970s following criticism that it was "vague, simplistic, and ideological" and unsupported by empirical research (Bernburg, 2019, p. 179). Interest in labeling theory waned during the political and social shift toward more aggressive, conservative crime control policies in the early 1980s (Harris, Welsh, & Butler, 2000). Lopes et al. (2012) speculate that labeling theory's decline in the 1980s also stemmed from researchers' narrow focus on the theory's self-concept prong and from their inadequate approaches to research design. They also attribute labeling theory's recent resurgence to complementary theories linking labeling theory to emotional responses such as shame and pride; more research into adolescent concepts of self and behavior based on others' appraisals; and an emerging focus on the developmental perspectives on behavior across the life course. Labeling theory has reemerged with stronger theoretical and empirical support describing the effects labeling has on deviant, delinquent, and criminal behavior.

Modern labeling theory has its origins in two theoretical traditions: conflict (or critical) theory, which postulates that "political and economic power determines what is labeled and who is labeled" and symbolic interaction theory, which argues that "the experience of being labeled is instrumental in the creation of both a more deviant character and a more deviant lifestyle" (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 361). Labeling theory rests on the presumption that formal and informal deviant and criminal labels carry stigmatizing markers for those who receive the labels (Bernburg, 2019). Labels associated with criminal offenders also carry strong negative

stigmatizing markers, often attributing immorality or evil to those who receive the labels (Harris, Welsh, & Butler, 2000). Labeling theorists argue that labels attached to individuals through law enforcement and criminal justice involvement carry the most significant negative stigmatization because of formal state-sanctioned rituals such as arrest and trials (Bernburg, 2009). Similar formal rituals result in the attachment of stigmatizing labels to justice-involved youth, but no comparable rituals exist to remove the labels following the completion of the punishment phase of their interaction with the juvenile justice system (Bernburg, 2019). Restivo and Lanier (2015) suggest that formal labeling has an indirect effect on future crime and deviance through the changes in the labeled individual's "identity, values, associations, or commitments" (p. 117).

While researchers have typically approached labeling theory as a theoretical framework to examine delinquency and criminal behavior, Duxbury and Haynie (2020) characterize it as "foremost a theory of social marginalization with implications for inequality..." (p. 2). They advocate the use of labeling theory as a theoretical framework to examine power and reproduction and, in doing so, they turn its focus away from the individuals who receive stigmatizing labels and toward the institutional agents who impose stigmatizing labels. It is this conceptualization that has direct application to this study's theoretical framework, for this conceptualization describes labeling as an enforcement mechanism that school personnel as institutional agents use against dishonored individuals such as justice-involved youth to justify their stigmatization, isolation, and alienation within the field of education.

### ***Labels to Enforce the Rules of the Field***

In the field of education, labeling serves as a mechanism for institutional agents to enforce the rules of the field, ensuring that justice-involved youth carry stigmatizing markers identifying them as dishonored individuals unworthy of participation in the social space that the

field of education defines and undeserving of access to the capitals that the field of education controls. In addition, the stigmatization that schools and school personnel impose on justice-involved youth acts as a form of symbolic violence that reinforces the field's right to selectively ordain capitals and inequitably distribute educational benefits. Finally, the stigmatization serves as a warning to other dishonored individuals of the consequences of violating field rules.

**Labeling and Unintended Secondary Sanctions.** Policies and practices addressing juvenile crime and school safety have led to unintended consequences for justice-involved youth because they are more likely to be identified to schools and school personnel through interagency coordination efforts. Advocates for greater communication and coordination among law enforcement, juvenile justice, social services, and education agencies have encouraged practices to support justice-involved youth while ensuring school and community safety but have not considered the possible secondary sanctions that might be imposed against justice-involved youth. As Henning (2004) notes:

Motivated by concerns for school safety and a desire to prevent delinquency, counties and local judicial districts across the country have begun to develop interagency collaboratives for the purpose of sharing information in an attempt to identify those students most likely to bring crime to school campuses. (p. 543)

Other researchers also have called for greater coordination among agencies to support school reentry for justice-involved youth and have emphasized the crucial role that schools play in the process. Belkin (2020) describes the positive contributions that schools might make to successful school and community reentry:

The potential role schools can play as supportive institutions in the transition and aftercare of reentry youth cannot be overstated. In general, schools can provide a physical

hub for coordination of multiple services for reentry youth, serve as a place of belonging and social-emotional support, and provide reentry youth with productive activities that will help them in their current and future lives. (p. 2507)

While greater coordination offers opportunities to support justice-involved youth during the difficult school reentry process, the information and resources shared among agencies also brings justice-involved youth to the attention of school personnel for what might be low-level delinquent behavior, leads to their identification as justice-involved youth, and triggers secondary formal and informal sanctions during and after they return to school. Liberman, Kirk, and Kim (2014) identify the drawbacks arising from greater communication and coordination among institutions and institutional agents, noting that justice-involved youth are often perceived as more likely to be dangerous or more likely to engage in unlawful behavior and that such perceptions often increase scrutiny. They write:

Our results suggest that the large labeling effect found on rearrest truly reflects secondary sanctioning—that is, differential societal response to a youth with an “arrestee” or “delinquent” label—and that this societal response is not mediated by the differential offending behavior of the juvenile. (Liberman, Kirk, & Kim, 2014, p. 364)

Despite supporting greater coordination among agencies, Belkin (2020) also notes that stigmatizing labels might follow justice-involved youth and adversely affect their school reentry:

The impact of stigma that youth may face upon returning to school and being labeled as “problem” students often increases the likelihood of truancy; they do not feel like they belong at the school and therefore do not want to be there. (Belkin, 2020, p. 2514)

Liberman, Kirk, and Kim, (2014) suggest that the secondary sanctions schools impose often manifest as restricted participation in the general school environment, lost academic and

extracurricular opportunities, and exclusion from beneficial school personnel and peer relationships, which they believe affect school completion and recidivism. They write:

The result of the primary sanction (arrest) and the secondary sanction (school exclusionary policies and practices) is an increased likelihood of high-school dropout and diminished prospects for going to college...thereby leading to a greater likelihood of future criminality. (p. 347-348)

The secondary sanctions arising from school exclusionary policies and practices promoted by school institutional agents combine with primary sanctioning arising from law enforcement encounters and juvenile justice system involvement to further isolate and alienate justice-involved youth during their school reentry and increase the likelihood that they will abandon school before completing their education.

The stigmatizing labels justice-involved youth acquire shape school institutional agent perceptions and reactions, which, in turn, contribute to exclusionary practices that restrict reintegration and participation in the school social space for justice-involved youth. The deviant label itself often leads to “collateral consequences” that include specific efforts to block the stigmatized individual’s access to educational opportunities (Dennison & Demuth, 2018, p. 193). Research into labeling in schools also has shown a relationship between formal labeling events such as arrests and higher school dropout rates and lower academic achievement (Lopes et al., 2012). The effects of labeling extend beyond the schoolhouse doors, affecting future employment opportunities and criminal justice system involvement and serving as a long-term social “stratification mechanism” (Duxbury & Haynie, 2020, p. 11). Despite research identifying the negative effects labeling has on vulnerable and marginalized youth, the practice of formally

and informally identifying justice-involved youth prior to or during their school reentry remains prevalent in schools (Marsh & Noguera, 2018).

**Labels as Broken Windows and Distorted Mirrors.** Justice-involved youth face stigmatization because the characteristics typically associated with delinquent or criminal labels carry significant negative connotation and denotation. Labeling theory describes how stigmatizing labels serve as a window through which observers anticipate possible future misconduct from justice-involved youth and leads observers to attribute real and perceived misconduct to individuals who are believed to possess the deviant or criminal characteristics associated with the labels (Bernburg, 2019). Negative labels and the characteristics associated with them also become a mirror, or “master status,” for labeled individuals and supplant other positive or neutral characteristics that they see in themselves (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989; Bernburg, 2019). Schur (1971) refers to this mechanism of identity replacement as “role engulfment,” a process through which labeled individuals assume the characteristics associated with deviant labels because the labels others impose on them deny them nondeviant roles. Paternoster and Iovanni (1989) explain it thus:

Being typified by others as a deviant, then, may have two distinct consequences for actor’s self: one may view oneself as others do (as a deviant), and one may begin to perceive the self in a less favorable light, as less worthy. (p. 380)

In other words, labeling theory suggests that justice-involved youth who are labeled delinquent or criminal adopt characteristics associated with the labels. The labels then become a distorted mirror that dominates their self-perceived master statuses, leads them to believe that they possess the negative characteristics associated with the labels imposed on them, and encourages a belief that they are unworthy of positive social relationships and the benefits of such relationships.

Wiley, Slocum, and Esbensen (2013) described the process through which external perceptions, master statuses, and role engulfment contribute to further delinquency, isolation, and alienation among justice-involved youth:

Labeling theory...maintains that youth who are labeled delinquent are more likely to be excluded from conventional activities, adopt a deviant identity, and spend time with delinquent peers. These social and attitudinal changes can lead to increased and sustained delinquency as the individual begins to use deviance as a defense or adjustment mechanism in a process known as secondary deviance. (p. 928)

Paternoster and Iovanni (1989) also argue that stigmatizing labels encourage justice-involved youth to adopt the characteristics associated with the labels given to them. They note that this process of role engulfment has significant negative consequences for justice-involved youth and isolates them from prosocial individuals and institutions. They write: “[Being] typified or labeled as a deviant has three main consequences: alteration of personal identity, exclusion from conventional opportunities, and an increase in the probability of further deviance” (p. 375-376).

Labeling theory considers primary deviance to be the initial act that led to juvenile justice system involvement, while secondary deviance arises from strong societal reactions as a form of secondary sanctioning to the initial deviant act. As Harris, Welsh, and Butler (2000) explain: “Secondary deviance emerges when one engages in additional deviant behavior attributable to stigmatization and changes in self-concept rather than the original deviant behavior” (p. 375). Justice-involved youth who engage in secondary deviance do so in a frustrated response to the overt and covert condemnation they receive from others (Wiley, Slocum, & Esbensen, 2013) and to express the master status they have adopted from the externally imposed identity (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). The “escalation to secondary deviance rests heavily on the subjective effects

of being labeled; that is, the labeling experience serves to recast individuals *in their own eyes* as well as in the eyes of others” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 378). The process becomes self-fulfilling as justice-involved youth adopt characteristics associated with the labels given to them and engage in further unlawful behavior, thus fulfilling the expectations derived from the label.

**Stigmatization, Isolation, and Peer Delinquency.** Labeling theory provides part of the explanation for the process justice-involved youth encounter during school reentry. Labels such as “delinquent” or “criminal” assigned to justice-involved youth influence not only their master statuses but also their interactions with the school community (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989). Because labels associate traits that society deems to be “undesirable, anti-social or even abhorrent” with labeled individuals, justice-involved youth experience stigmatization and isolation from school personnel and peers occupying the same social space (Marsh & Noguera, 2018, p. 453). Restivo and Lanier (2015) suggest that the stigmatizing labels activate biased responses from school personnel who, as institutional agents, control access to relationships, bonding opportunities, and educational benefits. They write:

[I]t is plausible to accept the notion that conventional others often respond to the labeled individual with mistrust, reservation, and caution because he or she is now perceived to be a “criminal” and/or dangerous. The stigmatizing preconceptions towards a criminal offender will result in blocked opportunities and negative perceptions for future success for the labeled individual. (p. 120)

School personnel and peer perceptions derived from the stigmatizing labels imposed on (or embraced by) justice-involved youth have significant relevance to their school reentry experiences. The exclusion that they encounter leads to isolation and alienation from the school community and gives them few prosocial paths toward reintegration through relationships with

school personnel and peers and bonding opportunities through academic achievement and extracurricular activities. Lopes et al. (2012) describe this seemingly inevitable outcome:

[E]xclusion from conventional opportunities, once triggered by a labeling event, can mediate further entrenchment in deviant behavior. In this sense, knowledge that an adolescent has been in trouble with the law may have a stigmatizing impact that is experienced initially in school, a social environment where youth spend a substantial amount of time. (p. 460)

If justice-involved youth encounter what they perceive to be a hostile reception from school personnel and peers, then they are far less likely to feel integrated into the school community and are far more likely to abandon school. The cycle becomes self-sustaining, with returning youth pushed to the social margins of the school community: “Specifically, discrimination by others as well as expectations of rejection may cause the labeled individual to reduce contact with prosocial others, which in turn affects future opportunities” (Wiley, Slocum, & Esbensen, 2013, p. 928). The stigmatizing labels borne by justice-involved youth serve as a scarlet letter and lead to their exclusion from prosocial activities or withdrawal from such activities to avoid negative interactions with school personnel and peers, thus limiting their participation in the school as a field and restricting their competitive access to educational benefits that they can exchange for present and future ordained capitals.

The isolation and alienation justice-involved youth encounter during school reentry separates them from the opportunities that schools provide and drives them deeper into the delinquent master status they have come to accept. Paternoster and Iovanni (1989) viewed this process of isolation and alienation as an inevitable outcome of stigmatizing labels: “For labeling theory, the deviant identity is made even more plausible when actor’s access to conventional

(normal) roles and opportunities becomes problematic” (p. 380). The stigmatizing label pushes justice-involved youth to the fringes of the school social environment and leaves them without access to the positive prosocial relationships that create avenues to conventional success available to their unlabeled peers: “Not only may deviant actor be barred explicitly and implicitly from social interactions with normal others; such a person also may be barred from conventional opportunities, i.e., legitimate avenues of goal attainment” (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989, p. 380). Restivo and Lanier (2015) also noted the effect labeling has on restricting the life course of stigmatized individuals. They write: “[O]fficial labeling can stigmatize an individual in ways that may ‘push’ them away from conventional society, which will then negatively impact many areas of an individual’s opportunities and available choices” (p. 118). In a similar vein, Duxbury and Haynie (2020) identify the effect stigmatizing labels have on limiting access to “conventional avenues for success” for stigmatized individuals (p. 1).

Justice-involved youth who cannot access social relationships, bonds, and educational benefits in school might further embrace the deviant identity they have received and withdraw further from the stabilizing environment schools provide them. Marsh and Noguera (2018) describe how the labels imposed on justice-involved youth by school personnel create a seemingly inescapable outcome: “[T]he labels, which are subjective judgments and perceptions prescribed by those in power (i.e., teachers and administrators), may transform into hard facts, and may eventually create a self-fulfilling prophecy for students” (p. 452).

Without prosocial support from school personnel and peers, youth turn to unconventional or deviant groups such as gangs to access nonjudgmental social support or seek shelter from condemnation (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006). The search for belonging drives justice-involved youth deeper into deviant peer groups who engage in delinquent behavior, further

separating them from prosocial peers and adults who might moderate their delinquency. Restivo and Lanier (2015) write: “The labeling process creates an identity for the individual who is congruent with the delinquent label, placing the adolescent in the company of deviant others, and denying the individual prosocial expectations” (p. 133). Wiley, Slocum, and Esbensen (2013) describe the process as a self-reinforcing quest for acceptance and validation, leading justice-involved youth to respond to the exclusion they encounter at school by seeking inclusion in deviant groups outside of school. They write: “Participation in delinquent peer groups is reciprocally related to both social exclusion and deviant identity. Exclusion and withdrawal from prosocial peers encourage labeled individuals to find support in deviant others, who accept and reinforce deviant attitudes and beliefs” (p. 931).

For justice-involved youth, the stigmatizing label discourages successful reentry into prosocial groups, encourages adoption of the delinquent persona, and forecloses access to ordained capitals available through “legitimate avenues of goal attainment” such as educational benefits. In summary, schools become nothing more than a source of frustration, condemnation, isolation, and alienation for justice-involved youth, pushing them to the edges of the school community and, ultimately, out of the school entirely and into groups that will not only accept the justice-involved youth’s stigmatizing label but also embrace, celebrate, and reward the justice-involved youth for the label.

### ***Research Examining Labeling Theory, Delinquency, and Schools***

Studies incorporating labeling theory into their theoretical frameworks have examined the effects formal and informal labels have on primary and secondary delinquency; secondary sanctioning; perceived master statuses; and school social bonds. The studies have not directly examined labeling effects on school reentry and educational outcomes for justice-involved

youth; however, their theoretical frameworks and findings provide guidance for labeling theory's application in this study.

Adams and Evans (1996) used data from the first two waves of the National Youth Survey conducted in 1976 and 1977 to examine labels associated with delinquency in school environments in a sample of 1,725 youth aged 11 to 17. Their findings indicated that peer relationships had the most significant effect on delinquent behavior, but they also found an indirect link between informal teacher labeling and delinquency. In their view, "these results indicate that teachers and school officials should view teacher labeling as a potential contributor to *delinquency*" (p. 209). This conclusion suggests that school personnel indirectly contribute to further delinquent behavior through their use of stigmatizing labels.

Drawing on data from the National Evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training program, Wiley, Slocum, and Esbensen (2013) conducted a quantitative study to examine the effects police contact and the labels that arose from such contact had on future delinquent behavior in a population of 2,127 youth. They compared the delinquency outcomes of three different police contact levels: youth who were arrested compared against youth who faced no police contact; youth who were stopped but not arrested compared against youth who faced no police contact; and youth who were arrested compared against youth who were stopped. To test a secondary deviance hypothesis – that official labeling results in exclusion and attenuated social bonds – they incorporated measures of social exclusion and inclusion at school, such as interest in academic performance and participation in school activities and athletics. Their findings supported their hypothesis that more significant police contact resulted in a reduction in prosocial bonds and activities and an increase in delinquent behavior: "As expected, as contact severity increases, respondents report less commitment to school, worse grades, more social

exclusion, more delinquent attitudes, greater involvement with deviant peers, and higher levels of delinquency” (p. 937).

To compare the effects of formal and informal labeling on 277 incarcerated youth at two Mississippi facilities, Adams, Robertson, Gray-Ray, and Ray (2003) presented their subjects with a questionnaire to assess their perceptions of the negative labels that they had received from three informal labeling sources: parents, teachers, and peers. The researchers found in the informal labeling group that teacher labeling surpassed peer and family labeling in significance, served as the strongest single predictor of general delinquency, and outweighed formal labeling from official agencies. They speculated that teachers and peers are more likely to exclude justice-involved youth from their social groups than family members, resulting in a more pronounced negative interpretation and reaction toward these groups. In contrast, parents are more likely to react inclusively to their children’s delinquent behavior, which might mitigate negative perceptions and reactions to this group.

To test the effects of labeling on delinquency and on societal responses to labels via future sanctioning, Liberman, Kirk, and Kim (2014) drew on data collected by the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, the Chicago Police Department, and the Illinois State Police to conduct a multiyear three-wave longitudinal study. The re-arrest outcome component of the study included 1,249 youth in two cohorts (12-year-olds and 15-year-olds) drawn from 80 Chicago neighborhoods. The study’s findings lent support to labeling theory in three ways: a first arrest increased the likelihood of re-arrest; a first arrest had a larger effect than further delinquent behavior on the increased likelihood of re-arrest; and a subsequent arrest was not due to re-offending. The researchers suggested that a first arrest increased the likelihood of subsequent arrests for study participants through secondary sanctioning imposed by law

enforcement personnel, teachers, administrators, and other authority figures. They speculated that this secondary sanctioning process not only increased the likelihood that justice-involved youth would face re-arrest but also increased their likelihood of school dropout. They wrote:

[An] arrest record officially marks a juvenile as a “criminal” and changes the way educational institutions treat the student. Students with criminal records are often pushed out of high school through exclusionary policies and segregated into specialized programs for problem youths. (Lieberman, Kirk, & Kim, 2014, p. 347-348)

Even though Lieberman, Kirk, and Kim’s (2014) research focused on labeling theory and juvenile arrests, their findings have significant importance for justice-involved youth undergoing school reentry. As the researchers noted, justice-involved youth experience the stigmatization associated with delinquent or criminal labels that school personnel impose on them, which leads to exclusion from the school community or segregation into separate educational programs.

### ***Summary***

Labeling theory describes the interlocking system of primary sanctions arising from law enforcement contact and juvenile justice system involvement and secondary sanctions embedded in school policies and practices enforced by school personnel acting as institutional agents. The status that justice-involved youth carry as stigmatized individuals isolates them from prosocial relationship and bonding opportunities with school personnel and peers and encourages them to seek support in stigmatized groups that also might face isolation and alienation due to their dishonored statuses.

### **Social Control Theory: Relationships, Attachments, and School Engagement**

Social control theorists argue that a positive relationship exists between social bonds and prosocial behavior, which has led researchers in criminology, sociology, education, and other

fields to apply social control theoretical lenses to studies examining how youth form or break social bonds with family, peers, and school institutional agents. Research into social control theory has been driven by the relationships between poor social bonds and higher delinquency rates, substance use, school dropout, and teen pregnancy (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Social control theory also has drawn researcher interest because school bonding presents practitioners with opportunities for intervention at the division, building, and classroom level to promote social bonds through the creation of learning environments that encourage new bond formation and support existing bonds (Maddox & Prinz, 2003).

### ***Origin and Theoretical Framework***

Social control theory presumes that delinquency arises when individuals fail to bond or lose existing bonds to the social order (Hirschi, 1969), with parents and schools serving as the primary connection points for social bonds (Finn, 1989). Researchers examining the bonding process that youth undergo in communities, schools, and families have conceptualized social bonds as comprising four components: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief (Wiatrowski, 1978). Attachment represents the connections that youth form with significant others, while commitment describes a youth's investment in conventional behavior and their attitude toward work, education, and family life (Wiatrowski, 1978). Involvement describes a youth's connection to prosocial behavior, and belief entails a youth's engagement with a common value system of shared norms (Wiatrowski, 1978). Unlike cultural deviance theorists who proposed that justice-involved youth operated under a different value system, Hirschi (1969) theorized that they understood but rejected a shared social value system and embraced their delinquent behavior (Wiatrowski, 1978).

In the early 1990s, social control theory as a theoretical framework to examine social bond formation and its relationship to delinquent behavior turned away from external social influences and toward internal characteristics. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) adopted this new perspective and revised Hirschi's (1969) social control theory by adding the element of self-control as a restraint on delinquent behavior. The revised social control theory, which Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) renamed self-control theory, described a relationship between delinquency and weak school bonds as the outcome of the same factor: poor self-control. Self-control theory also had implications for interventions to reduce delinquent behavior, suggesting that promoting self-control or removing the appeal of deviant behavior offered superior reduction to delinquent behavior than interventions promoting social bonds (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory acknowledged social control theory's principle that attachments to prosocial parents and teachers promoted self-control through oversight, support, and, when appropriate, formal and informal sanctions imposed on youth for noncompliant or delinquent behavior (Maddox & Prinz, 2003).

Research examining the relationships among academic achievement, school engagement, educational outcomes, behavior, and juvenile delinquency has focused on two social control theory models: the participation-identification model and the frustration-self-esteem model (Finn, 1989). The participation-identification model suggests that weak school bonds and low school value assessment increases negative educational outcomes, misconduct, and juvenile delinquency. As Finn (1989) writes: "[S]tudents who identify with school have an internalized conception of belongingness – that they are discernibly part of the school environment and that school constitutes an important part of their own experience. . . .these individuals value success in school-relevant goals" (p. 123). In contrast to the participation-identification model, the

frustration-self-esteem model suggests that academic and social failures increased negative educational outcomes, misconduct, and juvenile delinquency. Finn (1989) identified two factors as the foundation of the frustration-self-esteem model: “Consistent patterns of scholastic failure may threaten one’s self-view, resulting in a search for alternate activities that may be less sanctioned socially but through which the youngster can experience success” (Finn, 1989, p. 120). This study adopted the participation-identification model’s theoretical framework, for it offers a more accurate description of the mechanism of intentional exclusion that school personnel as institutional agents enforce against justice-involved youth during school reentry.

### ***School Engagement Elements***

Researchers have applied social control theoretical frameworks to examine youth engagement with school using terms such as “affiliation,” “involvement,” “attachment,” “commitment,” “bonding,” “alienation,” and “withdrawal” (Finn, 1989, p. 123). Researchers have identified two broad factors – environment and individual experience – that promote or hinder the formation of social bonds in school (Maddox & Prinz, 2003). While school environments affect social bond formation at an organizational level, individual experiences play an equally if not more significant role in school social bond formation. Even though research has shown that youth with positive feelings about their school are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001), the individual experiences justice-involved youth encounter during school reentry has not received the research attention that the school environment has received.

The social bonds Hirschi (1969) describes arise from connections to family, peers, school, work, and community, among other social groups, activities, and organizations. Hirschi theorizes that schools provide a pathway to adult roles and the accompanying economic rewards

inherent to such roles for youth who adopt the prosocial behaviors and attitudes associated with the accepted characteristics of such roles (Wiatrowski, 1978), a concept that harkens back to field theory. Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, and Wong (2001) also identify the importance of social bonds to prosocial behavior and argue that delinquent behavior encounters a fertile environment when youth lose or fail to establish family and school social bonds. They write: “[A]cts socially defined as deviant are more likely to occur when an individual’s bond to conventional society is weakened or broken. [...] Attachment to the family and the school are aspects of that social bond” ( p. 397). Because youth spend significant time in a school setting engaged with school personnel and peers, these groups play important roles in promoting or hindering school bond formation and, ultimately, controlling access to future adult roles and the rewards and privileges associated with those roles. The school as an institution and school personnel as institutional agents have a significant influence on the lives of students; thus, the bonds youth form with and within schools often become the most prominent and valued bonds that they possess.

Drawing on the work of Cernkovich and Giordano (1992), Maddox and Prinz (2003) identified four distinct bonding processes that occur between students and schools. First, attachment to school describes youths’ feelings about their school as an institution and encompass feelings of pride, belonging, safety, and comfort. Second, attachment to school personnel reflects youths’ respect, regard, and admiration for the teachers, staff, and administrators with whom they share interpersonal connections. Third, school commitment encompasses the personal investment in school activities and the priority youth place on school. Finally, school involvement describes participation in school activities measured through the frequency of activity and endorsement through membership. The existence of these bonds not only link youth more closely to prosocial communities that reinforce accepted behaviors and

attitudes but also discourage youth from drifting into delinquent communities that reward delinquent or criminal behaviors and attitudes.

Because justice-involved youth carry stigma arising from their juvenile justice system contact, school personnel offer them few opportunities to establish positive school bonds. In some cases, school personnel actively discourage justice-involved youth and other marginalized groups from participating in school bonding activities. Finn (1989) describes this intentional exclusionary practice as follows:

[T]he school may “reject” the student, either because of his or her behavior or grades, or both. Policies that exclude the youngster from extracurricular participation, detentions that don’t involve school-related work, and suspensions all make it more difficult for the individual to maintain regular contact with the school environment. For a student in this situation, dropping out may seem to be a very small step. (p. 131)

In summary, incomplete or nonexistent school bonds have been shown to have a relationship to school detachment and delinquent behavior. According to Cernkovich and Giordano (1992), youth who fail to form prosocial school relationships or engage in prosocial school activities face a greater likelihood of exhibiting delinquent behavior. They write:

Adolescents who do not care what their teachers think of them, who do not care about getting good grades, who do not spend much time on homework, who do not have high aspirations for the future, and who generally do not want to be in school – these are the youths who are the most likely candidates for delinquency. (p. 265)

Even though schools are fields nested within a web of interconnected fields, schools often serve as the primary opportunity that youth encounter beyond the family for positive social bond formation. Because school personnel control bonding opportunities, social control theory offers

insight into the positive and negative bonding experiences and opportunities that justice-involved youth encounter when they return to public and alternative schools.

### ***Research Examining Social Control Theory, Delinquency, and Schools***

The studies described in this section use social control theoretical frameworks to examine the relationship between school bond formation and delinquent behavior. It should be noted that the terminology describing variables associated with school bond formation varies among the studies and includes terms such as school attachment, engagement, and prosocial relationships.

In a study applying Hirschi's formulation of social control theory to an examination of school attachment and delinquent behavior, Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, and Wong (2001) reviewed data derived from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine whether family- and school-related factors decrease adolescent deviance across five categories: cigarette smoking, alcohol use, marijuana smoking, delinquency, and violent behavior. The sample included 13,568 youth who participated in the first and second study waves and met the inclusion criteria for the longitudinal study. Researchers operationalized school attachment as a composite scale that measured youths' feelings of connection to their school, teachers, and peers. Study findings suggested that school personnel had a stronger influence on preventing delinquent behavior before such behavior occurred. Findings also supported the importance of social bonds between students and other school personnel. The researchers recommended that schools pursue programs designed to support the formation of prosocial relationships among members of the school community, which, they theorized, would increase youth attachment to their schools and decrease delinquent behavior.

In a study examining whether prosocial bonds mediated youth recidivism in disadvantaged communities, Intravia, Pelletier, Wolff, and Baglivio (2017) measured prosocial

bonds in a sample of 24,971 youth who had been classified as high or moderate risk of reoffending. The sample included youth residing in 510 zip codes and covered a three-year sampling time frame. The researchers tracked each subject for one year, and they classified any youth rearrested within the tracking period as a reoffender. The researchers measured subjects' prosocial attachment to their communities, including two school-related measures: attachment to teachers, coaches, and school staff with whom subjects felt comfortable and school activities and athletic involvement. They found that prosocial relationships and prosocial activities were negatively associated with recidivism, but they also suggested that disadvantaged communities lacked opportunities for justice-involved youth to build prosocial relationships or participate in prosocial activities. The researchers argued that the absence of opportunities for justice-involved youth to build prosocial relationships and pursue prosocial activities lent itself to possible remediation through policy and practice changes. As the researchers noted:

[The] volume of prosocial activities available to youth in disadvantaged communities and the availability of prosocial relationships is something which policy can have a direct and measurable impact upon, which may in turn mitigate the impact of adverse community conditions, and lead to significant reductions in recidivism among previously adjudicated youth. (Intravia, Pelletier, Wolff, & Baglivio, 2017, p. 15)

The researchers also suggested that changes to school policies and practices to increase access to school personnel and participation in prosocial activities also might reduce recidivism for justice-involved youth.

Sabatine, Lippold, and Kainz (2017) used data from the PROMoting School-Community-University Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER) project to conduct a longitudinal study of 945 rural youth in Iowa and Pennsylvania to determine the interaction between parent

and school bonds and the interaction's effect on juvenile delinquency. Even though the study included disproportionate racial and geographic representation (84% of study subjects were White, rural youth), the study adds further support to the relationship between prosocial school bonds and delinquent behavior. The authors used Maddox and Prinz's (2003) school bonding measure, which assessed relationships to school personnel, school pride, and school belonging. They distinguished school bonding from school climate, noting that school climate focuses on organizational-level relationships, not on individual relationships. They used a 10-item school bonding scale that assessed their subjects' attachment to school, effort in classes, belonging in school, and attachment to teachers. They found that school bonding had a significant relationship to reducing delinquent behavior across all their models and had an additive effect when combined with parental bonding. The authors concluded that prosocial school bonds served as important mediators on delinquency and should be encouraged. They observed:

[Youth's] connections to their schools continue to matter across adolescence, and schools may best support youth by focusing on building strong school bonds with all students – even those who may also have strong parent bonds at home. Especially because adolescents' sense of school bonding wanes throughout middle school, schools may need to place particular emphasis on building strong bonds between teachers and students in order to reduce delinquent behavior. (Sabatine, Lippold, & Kainz, 2017, p. 13)

Despite the study's limitations with its disproportionate representation of White, rural youth, its findings provide additional data supporting the relationship among prosocial relationships and activities, school bonds, and delinquency.

Payne (2008) examined the relationship among school organization, student attachment to school, and delinquency in a data sample of 13,597 students in 253 public secondary

nonalternative schools drawn from the National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools to determine whether communally organized schools that stressed supportive relationships, common goals and norms, collaboration, and involvement mediated student delinquency at the individual level. The study used a student questionnaire to measure student bonding across three scales – Attachment, Commitment, and Belief. The mean of these three scales was used to calculate a Student Bonding measure. An additional 13-item scale on the questionnaire contained questions regarding delinquent activities. Payne (2008) found that school bonding and relationships had a negative association with delinquency, noting that:

[Students] who are more attached to their school and teachers, more committed to their education, and who give more legitimacy to school rules and norms are less likely to engage in delinquency than those who are not bonded to school. (p. 447)

In other words, students who share prosocial relationships with members of the school community and engage in prosocial activities as members of the school community engaged in less delinquent behavior.

Cernkovich and Giordano (1992) examined the effects of school bonds on delinquent behavior in a sample of 942 youth to determine whether Black students experienced school bonds and delinquent behavior differently than their non-Black peers. The researchers used a neighborhood sample instead of a school sample to avoid the likely bias inherent to a sample drawn from a population that regularly attended school. They found that Black and White males engaged in similar levels of delinquent behavior and that school bonding was uniform across race and gender. They concluded that school bonding had a negative relationship to delinquent behavior, but one aspect of the school bond – participation in athletic activities – resulted in increased delinquency.

Battistich and Hom (1997) conducted a longitudinal study investigating student perceptions of their school as a community and how their perceptions affected their participation in delinquent behavior. The study sample consisted of 1,434 fifth and sixth grade students in 24 elementary schools evenly drawn from six school districts across the country. The researchers purposefully sampled the school districts to ensure they achieved a sample that included diverse settings and populations, including large cities (11 schools), smaller cities (4 schools), and suburban and rural communities (9 districts). The study included an intervention program (Child Development Project) designed to increase a sense of community within the schools; 12 schools implemented the intervention, and 12 schools served as a comparison group. The study presented anonymous group surveys to students in the intervention and comparison conditions with a 38-item Likert-scale questionnaire. The survey included 28 items to measure student perceptions of caring and supportive interpersonal relationships and 10 items to measure student perceptions of autonomy and influence. The survey also collected data about student participation in delinquent behavior and victimization. The researchers found that the within- and between-school results revealed that a greater sense of community correlated with less delinquent behavior and victimization: “As expected, students’ sense of school as a community was negatively associated with drug use, delinquency, and victimization” (Battistich & Hom, 1997, p. 1999). Because the study used a cross-sectional design, the researchers warned against inferring causality from the results; however, despite the study’s limitations, it suggests that a positive relationship exists between prosocial school bonds and reduced delinquency and victimization.

To further examine the Child Development Project’s effect on school bonding and delinquent behavior, Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson (2004) conducted follow-up research to Battistich and Hom’s (1997) earlier study. Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson (2004) used a

subsample drawn from Battistich and Hom's (1997) study of former elementary students who had graduated to middle school. The sample included 1,246 students from the 1997 study, with 700 students representing the intervention group and 546 representing the comparison group. The researchers surveyed participants with a questionnaire measuring their school-related attitudes, personal and social attitudes, positive and negative behaviors, and peers' positive and negative behaviors. The researchers noted that study participants who had attended elementary schools with high Child Development Project implementation exhibited deeper school bonds and more prosocial behaviors, suggesting that early intervention to encourage prosocial school bonds might persist into later grades:

It is particularly encouraging that, relative to comparison students, [Child Development Project] students in middle school appeared to be much more "connected" to school (e.g., had a greater sense of the school as a community, liked school more, worked harder and were more engaged in their courses, had greater trust in and respect for teachers, had higher educational aspirations). (p. 259)

Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson (2004) warned that their follow-up study had causation-based limitations. They recommended that their results should be viewed with that limitation in mind; however, the relationship between prosocial school bonds and reduced delinquency that they found again presents a persuasive argument for the important effects prosocial school bonds have on increasing students' connections to their school communities and reducing their engagement in delinquent behavior.

Studies that have applied a social control theoretical lens to school bond experiences suggest that youth who develop few or no bonds with their school communities are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors. The informal and formal secondary sanctions that school

personnel impose on justice-involved youth deprive them of opportunities to form school bonds through processes such as attachment to school, attachment to personnel, school commitment, and school involvement that social control theory research suggests are beneficial to reducing delinquency. The isolation from the school community that justice-involved youth experience not only increases their risk for reoffending but also threatens their school reentry success.

### ***Summary***

The findings from social control studies lend support to this study's use of social control theory as a component of its theoretical framework. Research applying social control theory to the relationship between school bonds and delinquent behavior suggests that justice-involved youth returning to community and alternative schools encounter environments that passively discourage – or actively restrict – their opportunities to create prosocial relationships and pursue prosocial activities. Because justice-involved youth carry a stigmatizing label that lowers their status within the school community, they are isolated from relationships with school personnel and peers, discouraged from school and academic participation, barred from positive school-related activities, and denied a common value system with others in the school community, all of which deprive them of the prosocial bonds that they need to support successful school reentry.

### **School Reentry Studies**

The school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth has rarely been examined as a primary research question. The few studies that have included school reentry as a secondary or tertiary research question have restricted themselves to specific populations such as disabled youth or have incorporated school reentry into broader questions examining multiple aspects of facility-to-community transition experiences. This section describes studies identified in the

literature review that examined school reentry within narrowly defined study populations or examined school reentry as a secondary or tertiary research question.

The studies in this section are organized by methodology to illustrate the reliance on quantitative methodologies to examine the phenomenon of school reentry and justice-involved youth. The first part of this section will examine reentry studies that applied qualitative and mixed-methods methodologies. The second part of this section will examine reentry studies that applied quantitative methodologies. The final part of this section concludes with an explanation and rationale for this study's methodology and its relationship to existing reentry studies.

### **Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Studies**

Researchers have used qualitative and mixed-methods methodologies in exploratory studies examining the reentry experiences of justice-involved youth. The research questions that researchers have pursued encompass narrowly defined populations, programs, or reentry phenomena.

#### ***Interviews and Questionnaires***

The literature review identified two studies that examined the reentry experiences of disabled youth, but only one of the two studies incorporated disabled youth as study participants. Pollard, Pollard, and Meers (1994) studied transition services and strategies for disabled youth as well as the transition process itself to determine which services and strategies appeared to be the most effective, but the researchers did not include disabled youth or their families in the study. To collect data, the researchers submitted three rounds of questionnaires to education, social services, and corrections personnel. Study participants identified basic academic skills as fourth in their priority list of necessary services for disabled youth during reentry, and they ranked career exploration/education as last out of the 11 priorities. Hosp, Griller-Clark, and Rutherford

(2001) also studied disabled justice-involved youth, but their research targeted transition plan comprehension. The researchers conducted interviews in three secure facilities with 29 disabled youth who were preparing for community reentry to assess their comprehension and engagement with their transition plans. They found that participants who had received training about their transition plans responded more positively to the researchers' questions about community reentry; however, the study questions focused only on participants' involvement with transition planning, vocational training, pre-incarceration paid employment, and job skills, not secondary or post-secondary education.

### ***Multiple Interviews***

One small mixed-methods study examined the recidivism rate of youth returning to the community through a transitional living program. Abrams (2006) conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with 10 youth who were released into an intensive six-week transitional living program (TLP) from a 12-month therapeutic residential facility to study their perceptions of community reentry. The participants identified challenges that they anticipated prior to reentry, actual challenges they encountered after reentry, temptations to recidivate, coping strategies to avoid recidivism, and supports to reentry such as family members. Abrams noted that the participants emphasized education and vocation in pre-reentry interviews, but they shifted their priorities to financial and housing needs in post-reentry interviews.

### ***Interviews and Statistical Data Analysis***

In a study extending Abrams' (2006) research, Abrams, Shannon, and Sangalang (2008) employed a mixed-methods approach in their examination of a six-week TLP that included quantitative analysis of recidivism outcomes for TLP graduates and qualitative semi-structured interviews with youth and staff at the TLP facility. They compared recidivism rates for TLP

graduates against non-TLP youth within one year of reentry. They also compared youth perceptions of the TLP against staff perceptions. Their quantitative findings suggested that youth who had participated in the TLP had a higher, statistically insignificant recidivism rate, which the researchers attributed to risk factors such as younger age at time of admission and more prior arrests. In the qualitative findings, the researchers noted that youth and staff believed the program had value for developing practical skills, especially in relation to educational and vocational goals.

Using a mixed-methods approach, Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, and Havel (2002) conducted an extensive five-year longitudinal examination (the TRACS project – Transition Research on Adjudicated Youth in Community Settings) of the transition experiences of 532 formerly incarcerated Oregon youth to determine their engagement status, which researchers defined as working, attending school, or both. They collected engagement status data through telephone interviews conducted with participants six months post-exit and 12 months post-exit. The researchers reported low engagement rates for participants at the six-month and 12-month interview points when the rates were compared against data from similar reentry support programs. The researchers did not examine what factors might have affected participants' engagement rates with work or school.

Bullis and Yovanoff (2002) reexamined the TRACS data to clarify what combination of demographics and service delivery best predicted participants' reported work and school engagement statuses, so they focused on a subset of 108 study participants who had not recidivated. They theorized that high engagement in work or school likely contributed to a lower recidivism rate among participants in the subset. They argued that even though their findings arose from a small sample size, it still lent support to increased education and job placement

services for youth undergoing reentry: “The results of this study strongly indicate that services focusing on educational placement and securing appropriate competitive work should be provided to incarcerated youth immediately after their return to the community” (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2002, p. 76). The study seemed to indicate a relationship between recidivism and work and school engagement, but it did not examine specific work- or school-based factors that affected work and school engagement statuses.

### *Ethnographic Case Studies*

In a reflective report examining youth perspectives on reentry experiences, Sullivan (2004) compiled data and findings from several studies, including three field studies that he had conducted during the 1980s and 1990s, to focus on ethnographic case studies of five justice-involved youth who had been participants in his earlier research. Education appeared among the domains that Sullivan (2004) noted as being important to justice-involved youth, and he described school attendance and engagement as elements in a “master social status” for young people (p. 60). He also noted that schools created and imposed structural barriers on justice-involved youth during their reentry, which was difficult for them to overcome and increased the challenges they confronted. He also alluded to the effect labeling theory’s stigmatization had on the community reentry experiences of the justice-involved youth in his earlier studies, noting that: “When [justice-involved youth] reenter the community, they have the additional burden of the disruption caused by confinement and, in some cases, of stigma related to their status as adjudicated delinquents or convicted adult offenders” (p. 61). He also identified findings that the stigma associated with justice system involvement often led school officials to reject reentering justice-involved youth, further reducing the likelihood that they would complete their secondary educations. He also noted that Hirschfield’s (2001) research with Chicago youth seemed to

indicate that a drastic increase in youth undergoing justice system involvement had reduced the stigma associated with such involvement. Finally, Sullivan (2004) indicated that his data had been collected years prior to his report's publication.

### **Quantitative Studies**

The literature review found that researchers have placed more emphasis on quantitative methodologies in studies examining the reentry outcomes of justice-involved youth. The quantitative studies described in this section examined community reentry or transition support program efficacy, with school reentry indirectly examined as a secondary or tertiary research question. Again, the research questions have encompassed narrowly defined populations, programs, or reentry phenomena.

### ***Statistical Data Analysis***

Unruh, Gau, and Waintrup (2009) examined the effectiveness of a statewide reentry intervention for 320 youth who had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, a disability, or both. The researchers focused on two areas: study participant recidivism rates up to three years after release and the relationship between participant characteristics, intervention features, and recidivism. The intervention (Project SUPPORT – Service Utilization to Promote the Positive Rehabilitation and Community Transition of Incarcerated Youth with disabilities) provided prerelease training and coordinated planning to support community reentry. After release, youth continued to receive wrap-around community services support, job placement, and flexible education opportunities in addition to other transition services. The researchers compared their study recidivism data against Bullis et al.'s (2002) recidivism data from the TRACS project and found that youth who had received Project SUPPORT intervention recidivated at half the rate of the youth in the TRACS project.

### *Surveys*

Baltodano, Platt, and Roberts (2005) surveyed 120 youth in an urban detention facility about their views on the transition process, transition services, and program quality. The study found no relationship among gender, special education status, or school return and times detained, but it did find that youth who anticipated stable post-release placements had a significantly lower mean number of times detained than youth who anticipated less-stable placements. Findings also revealed that 42% of youth who had undergone prior detentions indicated that they had encountered trouble transitioning back to school.

Chung, Schubert, and Mulvey (2007) studied the reentry process of 413 justice-involved youth reentering their communities in two metropolitan areas to examine the relationships among court supervision, community-based services, antisocial activity, formal justice system involvement, school attendance, and employment. The findings indicated that intensive use of community-based services reduced the likelihood of recidivism. School reentry was not examined as a primary research question.

In a study examining gender differences in study participants' needs and fears regarding their transition from residential facilities to their communities, Fields and Abrams (2010) used a cross-sectional survey research design involving face-to-face, individual structured surveys conducted with 71 youth (36 males and 35 females) preparing to exit two residential facilities in Southern California. Their findings noted that few of the study participants had completed their educations, but almost all of them prioritized completing high school or enrolling in post-secondary education programs:

Although the average age of the sample was 17.6, only 10% had either graduated from high school or earned their GED, and the remaining youth reported high school status.

Accordingly, nearly all of the youth identified an immediate need to complete high school and/or enroll in a 2-year or 4-year college upon their reentry (p. 260).

Even though study participants noted education as a priority, they also recognized that they would face challenges to completing school. The study did not identify specific challenges that the study participants anticipated.

Abrams, Terry, and Franke (2011) conducted telephone surveys with 75 young men (18-25 years old) for their research examining the odds of reconviction in juvenile or adult criminal justice systems following participation in a community-based reentry program. They found that increased participation in reentry programs for longer periods decreased recidivism rates in the juvenile system but not in the adult system. They also suggested that education and employment reduced recidivism in the adult system for youth transitioning to adulthood, which suggests that a similar effect might occur with youth in the juvenile justice system:

Both education and employment were strongly associated with lower odds of recidivism in the adult system, suggesting that engagement in prosocial institutions may be critical to interrupting the cycle of offending for formerly incarcerated youth who are in the transition to adulthood phase. (p. 506)

They believed that their findings suggested employment or education services in wraparound reentry care would supplement existing case management and sustain recidivism rate reductions.

Clinkinbeard and Zohra (2012) provided 543 incarcerated youth in five facilities in Alaska, Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon a self-administered survey to study their transition expectations, fears, and strategies. The researchers coded survey responses to examine participants' expected and feared selves, finding that lifestyle, school, and jobs ranked as the most common expected selves. The researchers attributed the high value participants' placed on

school and jobs as expected selves to school attendance requirements and vocational programming participation in the residential facilities housing study participants.

Sinclair, Unruh, and Griller Clark (2016) surveyed 283 transition specialists, special education teachers, school staff, school administrators, community professionals, and general education teachers to examine their perceptions of justice-involved youth with disabilities returning to high school from secure facilities; transition services availability; school environment support; and reentry barriers as well as solutions to such barriers. Survey participants noted multiple challenges facing justice-involved youth with disabilities during their reentry to school, including inadequate transition services, inadequate teacher preparation, and insufficient school and district support.

### **Conclusion**

Researchers in sociology, criminology, public health, law, and other fields have studied justice-involved youth community reentry across multiple demographics, geographic regions, and variables; however, the narrower phenomenon of school reentry and the factors that encourage or discourage justice-involved youth from successfully returning to school and completing their educations have received less attention from researchers. Cole and Cohen (2013) suggest that the school reentry phenomenon warrants further examination:

Although studies have scrutinized ways to identify and address delinquent youth, little beyond the theoretical has been written to critique the way schools institutionally reject students reentering from the juvenile justice system (Feierman, Levick, & Mody, 2010). Educational scholars write about discrimination within schools as well as prevention and retention but rarely about the systemic barriers created to keep certain students outside school walls. (p. 14)

Cole and Cohen are not alone in their observation of the limited research that has examined the school reentry phenomenon. Goldkind (2011) also noted that researchers have conducted few examinations of the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth “despite the fact that the educational arena is a critical area of potential support or challenge for young people returning from the justice system to their communities” (p. 237).

The absence of research into the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth has left many important questions unanswered, especially for a vulnerable, marginalized population that likely would obtain significant benefits from education. For most justice-involved youth, incomplete educations leave them with inadequate academic, vocational, and social skills. Consequently, they face a greater likelihood of further involvement with the juvenile or adult justice systems in potentially recurring cycles of delinquent and criminogenic behavior with few to no resources available to support prosocial development and life courses. Even though research indicates that education likely reduces delinquent behavior and that justice-involved youth want to return to school and complete their educations, current formal and informal school policies and practices possibly do more to exacerbate than alleviate the school reentry challenges faced by justice-involved youth. Ultimately, the missing voices of justice-involved youth leave a knowledge gap in the research literature examining school reentry, hinder understanding of the factors affecting their school reentry, and impede development of more effective policies and practices to support school reentry.

The research literature supports a theoretical framework comprised of labeling, social control, and field theories to examine the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth. The community reentry studies described in this chapter suggest that a qualitative methodology using a multiple descriptive/explanatory case study design and semi-structured interviews to

develop data from study participants who experienced school reentry as justice-involved youth would most effectively address the study's research questions and would provide a perspective into a phenomenon that has been overlooked in the research literature. In short, the school reentry phenomenon presents not only researchers with opportunities to better understand an important and overlooked phenomenon but also policymakers and school personnel with opportunities to better support a vulnerable, marginalized student population.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the qualitative research design used in this study. First, it presents a reflection on the researcher's background and positionality. Second, it describes the research questions, qualitative rationale, naturalistic inquiry, constructivist paradigm, and multiple case study approach underlying this study. Third, it explains in detail the study timeline and data collection, including site selection, participant recruitment, and data collection methods. Fourth, it provides an explanation of data analysis approaches. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of validity and ethical challenges associated with studying vulnerable populations.

#### **Researcher Background and Positionality**

A researcher's background and identity has been noted as both a bias to be removed from the research design and a resource to be tapped to benefit the research goals (Maxwell, 2008). The multiple case study design for this study incorporates the researcher as a data collection instrument, which places me, as the researcher, in the position as an arbiter of the study design, site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and findings. My background as an at-risk youth, investigative reporter, legal advocate, and secondary English teacher who has worked with justice-involved youth and other vulnerable, marginalized students has influenced my research interests and the development of this study. I have attempted to be as cognizant as possible of the effects that my personal and professional experiences might have on the course of this study, and I have enacted safeguards to reduce possible bias and increase research objectivity. I also believe that my personal and professional experiences have provided me a context in which to situate this study and increased the project's overall quality because my personal and professional experiences allowed me to approach this work with a deep

appreciation of study participant experiences, a better understanding of the forces at play in their school reentry experiences, and a keener awareness of the research design's limitations.

### **Study Design**

The following sections will describe in detail the study design. First, it presents a review of the research questions the study examined. Second, it explains the rationale for the multiple descriptive/explanatory case study design used in this study. Third, it details the applicable research paradigms guiding this study. Fourth, it outlines the data collection sources and methods. Finally, it presents an overview and rationale for the data analysis plan. Each section also describes its alignment with the study's research questions.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study went through multiple iterations and continued to evolve during recruitment, participant screening, data collection, and data analysis. To develop the initial research questions in the early stages of the study, I reviewed existing literature, identified potential challenges facing my research, catalogued resources available to me, and explored research question structure and purpose. Qualitative methodologist Dr. David Naff provided invaluable assistance in developing the research questions through multiple conversations, email exchanges, and question revisions. Because I approached this study with a dynamic, recursive theoretical framework, I anticipated that the literature search and data collection and analysis would lead to modification of the research questions, and it did. The final research questions aligned with the theoretical framework and incorporated early data collected from study participants. They are listed below:

RQ1: How do justice-involved youth experience school reentry?

RQ2: How do justice-involved youth perceive their relationships with school personnel and peers?

RQ3: How do justice-involved youth perceive their school engagement opportunities?

RQ4: How do justice-involved youth perceive their access to educational benefits?

RQ5: How do justice-involved youth perceive the relationship between their school reentry experiences and their educational outcomes?

These research questions align with the suggested forms and purposes proposed by Agee (2009).

While the research questions contain some degree of overlap, the questions complement each other and provided slightly different but equally important investigatory paths. The interview protocol developed from these research questions solicited meaningful, informative data from study participants and will be described in a later chapter.

### **Qualitative Rationale**

A qualitative research design offered the best research framework for this study because I anticipated that it would generate data which have not been collected in previous studies examining the school and community reentry experiences of justice-involved youth. In addition, the literature, research questions, and research goals supported the use of a qualitative research framework for this study.

I examined different research designs for this study through multiple lenses arising from my research questions and research goals. When I began developing the research design, I believed the best data collection, analysis, and presentation would place the study participants' voices and stories at the center of this study. By centering the study participants' voices and stories, I also intended to address the essential but missing component that previous community and school reentry studies had omitted. These goals guided the development and finalization of

this study's design. My background in journalism and law also contributed to my decision to pursue a qualitative research design, for I have conducted hundreds of interviews with news and feature sources, legal clients, and witnesses, which generated informative, engaging content for publication and litigation. I ultimately determined that the visceral, compelling experiences that interviews allow study participants to reveal cannot be effectively captured through quantitative methods.

I considered and ultimately dismissed quantitative research designs because I believe that such designs only provide access to limited data, which leaves the full depth of human experience untouched and, therefore, unknown. In contrast, qualitative research design examines human experiences through the eyes and interpretations of those who have undergone and assimilated the experiences under examination (Polkinghorne, 2005). The thick, rich data interviews capture offers researchers more opportunities for understanding these lived experiences beyond the understanding offered through data captured with quantitative approaches. Polkinghorne (2005) significantly influenced my decision to pursue a qualitative research design that seeks explanation for phenomenon from those who experience the phenomenon: “[They] are specifically constructed to take account of the particular characteristics of human experience and to facilitate the investigation of experience” (p. 138). Qualitative research design also brings to bear a naturalistic lens to examine phenomenon in real-world settings without the researcher altering the phenomenon of interest through manipulation of variables (Golafshani, 2003). In other words, researchers who adopt a qualitative research design capture study participants' experiences in a real-world setting without removing the participants and phenomenon from their natural state, for such removal often alters participants' experiences and the examined phenomenon itself.

### *Flexible Research Design, Transient Study Populations, and COVID-19*

A qualitative research design provides more flexibility because it does not adhere to predetermined research methods established at a study's outset. Thus, the methods in qualitative research "depend on the specific setting and phenomena you are studying and the actual consequences of your strategy for studying it" (Maxwell, 2008, p. 233).

My first efforts at developing a qualitative research design began in late 2019 and anticipated recruiting from a participant pool of justice-involved youth who were undergoing school reentry during this study's data collection phase, which was originally scheduled for spring 2020. At that time, I believed that the flexibility inherent to qualitative research design would directly benefit my research because justice-involved youth tend to be a transient, vulnerable group. Therefore, I anticipated that I would encounter greater mobility and more unpredictability from study participants, which would create challenges to recruitment and data collection. I believed that a qualitative research design would give me flexibility to make changes to the study design as needed to accommodate this population while remaining committed to the study's research questions and goals.

The emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020 and the effects it had on school operations drove home the importance of flexibility as a key characteristic of qualitative research design. Because my early qualitative research design gave me flexibility, I was able to adapt to the changing, unpredictable course of the COVID-19 pandemic and continue forward with modifications to the early research design to accommodate changes in the participant pool and site selection without changing the research questions and study goals.

### *Neglected Research Paths, Neglected Solutions*

The literature review revealed the absence of studies using qualitative research designs to examine the experiences of justice-involved youth reentering public and alternative schools following contact with the juvenile justice system. The few qualitative studies that have incorporated justice-involved youth have not addressed the school reentry experience beyond indirect data collected through survey questions and focus groups. In contrast, this study employed a qualitative approach to collect school reentry data from study participants who recalled and shared their reentry experiences through thoughtful, reflective perspectives tempered by time and maturity.

This research report use of a qualitative research design also emphasized an important purpose: to make available school reentry data and findings to policymakers and practitioners. Fielding (2010) describes the superiority that qualitative case studies have to quantitative methods for highlighting phenomenon relevant to policymakers. He writes: “Qualitative case studies can bring alive policy issues with an immediacy sometimes lacking in quantitative data” (p. 130).

### **Naturalism**

This study embraced a naturalistic inquiry because its research questions, theoretical framework, and research goals made this the most logical and applicable approach. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry provides unmatched “contextual relevance and richness”; a “sensitivity to process” instead of rigid control and experimentation; theory derived from data; and application of the “human-as-instrument” approach (p. 235), all of which provide the clearest lens through which to analyze study participants’ experiences as former justice-involved youth and examine the complex phenomenon of school reentry that they encountered.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also describe five axioms of naturalistic inquiry that further illustrate that this approach presented the best path for this study: the existence of multiple realities accessible through holistic research methodologies; the interaction of the inquirer and participant; the development of idiographic knowledge that has potential for transferability; the recognition of multiple factors interacting to influence outcomes without clear causation; and the presence of values in the researcher, paradigm, theory, methodology, and participants or object.

This study's examination of the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth necessitated a naturalistic inquiry, for it offered the most efficient and promising means to collect data aligned with the study's research questions and goals. A naturalistic inquiry accepts that reality is a holistic, ever-changing experience, so theory development must be fluid and responsive to this dynamic view of reality to ensure that phenomena are accurately described (Westbrook, 1994). The fluctuating nature of reality emphasizes the researcher's role as the organizer who imposes order on collected data and the translator who derives meaning from analyzed data. The researcher's role also increases in significance in naturalistic inquiry, for the researcher is "squarely at the center of the research act" (Denzin, 1971, p. 167). Naturalistic researchers subjectively immerse themselves in their research processes from theory development and research question composition to data collection and analysis to final data interpretation.

### **Constructivism**

In this study, constructivism served as a research paradigm complementary to a naturalistic inquiry. Constructivism denies the existence of an objective reality because people create constructions of reality in their minds through their individual experiences, though others often share in such constructions (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). The constructivist

epistemological position emphasizes the relationship between researcher and participant and their construction of meaning together. Because researchers create meaning through their interaction with study participants, researchers must acknowledge this relationship to themselves and in their research.

Constructivists argue that the only way to know reality is through the different constructions individuals create to capture their understanding of the realities that they have experienced (Flick, 2004). Thus, researchers are left with multiple realities as they exist in the experiences related to them by study participants. Constructivism centers the individual's understanding of the reality that they have experienced and interpreted instead of an objectively, externally defined and imposed construction of reality that bears little resemblance to the realities – or lived experiences – of individuals as they have experienced them. Flick (2004) explains this process:

[Our] access to the world of experience – the natural and social environment and the experiences and activities it contains – operates through the concepts constructed by the perceiving subject and the knowledge deriving from these. These are then used to interpret experiences, or to understand and attribute meanings. (p. 90)

Researchers and study participants create meaning when study participants relate their understanding of reality as they have experienced it to researchers who become part of the experience through study participant's recreation of the reality that they experienced through the retelling. In qualitative research, this process moves the researcher toward the study's center and recasts the researcher as an active participant in not only the data collection process but also the data *creation* process through the researcher's interaction with study participants.

This study embraced a constructivist paradigm through its examination of the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth in three ways. First, it asked study participants to describe their school reentry experiences as they perceived, assimilated, and constructed their understanding of their experiences during their school reentry, which required them to reconstruct the reality that they experienced within a framework of truth as they perceived it. Second, it asked study participants to consider what different factors might have created a different school reentry experience for them, which encouraged them to create a speculative reality that they never experienced. Third, it placed study participants at the center of the research questions and gave them control over the data that they generated through their internal decisions to share their stories and their external interaction with me as the researcher who presented protocol questions to them. The reflection, speculation, and recreation that study participants pursued as they recalled and reconstructed their school reentry experiences years or even decades after they underwent them interacted with the examination and data collection that I as the researcher pursued as I solicited, recorded, and interpreted their experiences.

### **Multiple Case Studies**

The use of multiple case studies allowed for collection of rich data derived from close contact with a small participant population and for detailed experiences drawn from the participant's perspectives.

#### ***Rationale***

In the literature, case study methodology definitions appear to be quite broad, and this diversity of definitions can be attributed to their adaption to different research questions and application to different phenomenon (Bergen & While, 2000). While it seems that almost anything could be defined as a "case" for the purposes of a case study, definitions in the

literature seem to arise more from examples than rigid conceptualizations. Despite the differences among case study design conceptualizations, they share the common characteristic of a focus on an issue or phenomenon with the individual cases selected for their potential to provide data about the issue or phenomenon under investigation (Creswell et al., 2007). Case study design typically includes a detailed case description, contextual setting of the case, and a nonlinear case presentation. Case study design builds understanding through context and multiple data sources. Because researchers differ about the role case study design plays in the qualitative research process (Stake, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998), it remains a loosely characterized research design. This study relied on Creswell et al. (2007) for its conceptualization of case study:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 245)

This conceptualization of case study design aligned best with this study's research goals, research questions, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and anticipated research product. This study focused on multiple study participants who interacted with me through multiple communications and interviews spread over weeks or months. The study participants who comprised the multiple cases examined during the course of this study also shared extensive personal information to create a more rounded case description of their lives and their school reentry experiences.

### ***Multiple Case Study Design Benefits***

A multiple case study design brought significant benefits and few drawbacks to this study. First, it allowed for the development of a participant pool drawn from different regions, school types, demographics, and time periods. The comparisons and contrasts that arose from the study participants' experiences created richer, more nuanced answers to the research questions being examined, an aspect that Zainal (2017) identified as inherent in multiple case study designs. Second, it provided windows into systems, so it narrowed the research focus to issues "that are fundamental to understanding the system being examined" (Tellis, 1997b, p. 2). The multiple case study design provided a selective focus, allowing me to direct study participants to a limited set of factors under examination through a semi-structured interview protocol to better understand the school reentry experiences that they encountered in public and alternative schools. Third, it provided multiple perspectives into the same phenomenon. Tellis (1997b) describes this aspect of a case study design as "multi-perspectival analyses," in which the researcher considers multiple voices and interaction among subjects and others to "give a voice to the powerless and voiceless" (p. 2). This study's focus on adults who had experienced school reentry as justice-involved youth elevated their perspectives and stories and, by doing so, empowered them to share their experiences. In addition, the multiple case studies design not only gave their individual voices prominence but also magnified their voices through the commonalities among their experiences. Fourth, case studies offer rich data sources to supplement quantitative findings through their ability to capture the experiences of the study participants engaged in the phenomenon under examination (Tellis, 1997a). This study supplemented the data and findings available in existing quantitative research reports examining

school reentry and educational outcomes for justice-involved youth, so it added a new perspective to the research literature describing this phenomenon.

In conclusion, a multiple case studies design provided the best approach to collect rich, thick data surrounding a phenomenon that has not been fully examined through this approach in the research literature. The data collected from study participants through this design opened a window into the school reentry experience of justice-involved youth, demonstrated the commonalities among their experiences, and added to available knowledge regarding this phenomenon.

### ***Multiple Case Study Design Limitations***

A multiple case study design possesses some limitations. Case study criticism is rooted in what its detractors characterize as its limited usefulness for generalizability, especially if the case study focuses on a single case (Tellis, 1997a). In contrast, Yin (2014) argued that the generalization of case study findings is not to a population but to a theory, which is a reliable function of case study methodology and increases as the number of cases increase. Tellis (1997a) shared Yin's (1994) view and described case study generalizability in the following manner: "Multiple cases strengthen the results by replicating the pattern-matching, thus increasing confidence in the robustness of the theory" (p. 6). Because this study examined the application of labeling, social control, and field theories to the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth, a case study methodology's generalizability to theory was a beneficial, not detrimental, consideration when selecting this method to explore the research questions and the pursue research goals. A multiple cast study design complemented this study's theoretical framework and supported its transferability to future studies.

## **Study Timeline**

This study progressed through four overlapping phases between March 2020 and July 2021. Phase one included study design and multiple redesigns due to complications arising from the COVID-19 pandemic; this phase began in March 2020 and continued through December 2020. Phase two included site selection and initial participant recruitment; this phase began in August 2020, continued through January 2021, and overlapped with phases one and three. Phase three included additional site selection and approval, additional recruitment, and early data processing; this phase began in November 2020, continued into March 2021, and overlapped with phases one and two. Phase four included additional data processing and analysis, which began in earnest in February 2021 and overlapped with phase three. Adding more sites, expanding recruitment, engaging in data analysis, and drafting preliminary findings occurred at multiple points in phases two, three, and four. The four study phases will be described in the following sections.

### **Phase One**

Study design began in March 2020. The first iteration of this study anticipated that participants would be recruited from justice-involved youth who were undergoing school reentry late in the 2019-2020 school year. Because the COVID-19 pandemic closed public schools, I returned to the research literature and developed a redesign focusing on this study's recruitment sites and study population. I determined that a study population consisting of adults who had undergone school reentry as justice-involved adolescents would provide usable data for this study's research questions and purpose. I identified community reentry organizations that work with justice-involved adults as potential recruitment sites, theorizing that adults who were involved with such organizations might have had contact with the juvenile justice system as

adolescents. My speculation was based on research literature suggesting that justice-involved adults often have had contact with the juvenile justice system as adolescents, and my interaction with staff and clients at the organizations that served as recruiting sites proved this assumption to be valid.

The study proposal was submitted to Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board in August 2020 and approval was obtained in September 2020.

### **Phase Two**

Participant recruitment began in September 2020, and the first study participant was enrolled that month. The first interview with the first study participant occurred on October 1, 2020. Personal reasons affecting the study participant delayed the second interview until December 9, 2020. Recruiting challenges continued to occur during phase two, and a study amendment was submitted to the Institutional Review Board seeking to expand recruiting sites to four additional locations. The amendment was approved, and additional sites were added to the recruiting pool.

### **Phase Three**

The second participant was enrolled on December 4, 2020, and he participated in his first interview on that date. He completed his second interview on January 15, 2021. The third participant was enrolled on January 13, 2021, and he participated in his first interview on that date. He completed his second interview on March 22, 2021. The fourth study participant was enrolled on March 1, 2021, and he participated in his first interview on that date. He completed his second interview on March 23, 2021.

## **Phase Four**

After data collection ended in March 2021, data processing began in earnest. Data processing and data analysis occurred simultaneously with fracturing and coding of the most recent primary and secondary data completed in April 2021. Data analysis ended in early June 2021 and was incorporated into the findings produced from earlier data analysis.

### **Data Collection**

All data sources in qualitative research serve one goal: “to provide evidence for the experience [the study] is investigating” (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). The data for this study were obtained from multiple remote interviews with adults who had been involved with the juvenile justice system as adolescents and returned to public or alternative schools after their arrest, adjudication, or incarceration. The reliance on study participants as the primary source for study data aligned with common approaches to data collection found in qualitative studies, which typically obtain primary data from intensive, long-term engagement with study subjects who provide accounts of their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2005; Devers & Frankel, 2000; Creswell et al., 2007; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014).

Interviews provide study participants and researchers an interactive partnership to examine phenomena with which the study participants have direct experience. While interviews rely on verbal communication to generate primary data for collection, they also allow researchers to collect non-verbal communication, which contributes to the “languaged data” acquired through the interviews (Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). The languaged data arising from interviews contains a complex array of words, sentences, and discourse that often prove difficult for analysis without tools specifically designed for this data (Polkinghorne, 2005).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study relied on audio/video and audio-only interviews conducted with study participants via an online video conferencing application (Zoom) and a voice over internet protocol phone service (Google Voice). The interviews were recorded with study participant permission. To verify the primary data, the interview transcripts were compared against the recorded interviews to ensure the transcripts accurately captured the content from the interviews. Marginalia on the transcripts recording important data about the study participants' tone, volume, pacing, and other vocal characteristics not readily apparent on the face of the interview transcripts served as a secondary data source. In addition, facial expressions and body language for the one study participant who completed audio/video interviews also served as a secondary data source. This secondary data combined fleshed out the primary data contained in the study participants' responses to the interview protocol questions, generated a more complete picture of them as individuals, and provided greater context for their school reentry experiences as justice-involved youth.

### **Study Participant Pool**

The original study design envisioned examining a population of justice-involved youth reentering school after contact with the juvenile justice system, but the rapid spread of COVID-19 led to restrictions on in-person learning, eliminating this group as a possible study population. Despite the complications to the study that the COVID-19 pandemic caused, the research questions and the study goals remained unchanged, and I considered other populations as viable alternatives to the initial population. I eventually determined that adults who had juvenile justice system contact as adolescents and returned to public and alternative schools presented an opportunity to examine the study's research questions and achieve its research goals. I initially feared that older study participants who were years or even decades past their juvenile justice

system contact and school reentry experiences might detract from the study data's visceral rawness, but I discovered that my fears regarding this possibility were unwarranted. The older study participants brought a deep understanding and a mature reflection to their interviews, and their protocol question responses revealed that they had given significant thought to their school reentry experiences in the intervening years that had passed since they had undergone school reentry. The shift from an adolescent participant pool to an adult participant pool ultimately resulted in far more benefits to data collection and data analysis than I had anticipated.

Using multiple case study research literature for guidance, I determined that the ideal study participant pool should consist of four to eight individuals (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Fusch & Ness, 2015). The maximum number of study participants was capped at eight to ensure data saturation was achieved and that rich, thick data was collected. Study participants were selected from two recruiting sites, and site personnel did not participate in this study for any purpose beyond supporting recruiting efforts. Five individuals met the study inclusion criteria, and four were selected for participation.

### ***Study Participant Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

The following inclusion criteria applied to study participants: willingness to participate in video and audio recorded interviews, prior juvenile justice system involvement, absence from school for a minimum of two weeks due to juvenile justice system involvement, school re-entry to public or alternative school, and school personnel and peer knowledge that the individual had juvenile justice system involvement.

The following exclusion criteria applied to study participants: unwillingness to participate in video and audio recorded interviews, limited or no contact with the juvenile justice system,

absence from school for less than two weeks due to juvenile justice system involvement, and the candidate's contact with the juvenile justice system was unknown to school personnel and peers.

## **Recruiting**

Devers and Frankel (2000) provided guidance in my search for appropriate recruiting sites. First, they suggest allotting enough time and patience to the task. Second, they advise using existing networks to connect with parties who can facilitate site access or serve as intermediaries. Third, they encourage researchers to involve themselves through professional affiliations or informal associations (e.g., volunteering or mentoring) with sites and subjects relevant to their research. Finally, they propose advertising through print or digital media to recruit subjects. I had knowledge of potential recruiting sites that I had encountered during my journalism and legal careers – adult offender voluntary reentry programs – and I relied on my past and present professional networks and affiliations to develop these recruiting sites.

### ***Recruiting Efforts, Challenges, and Successes***

Five adult offender voluntary reentry program offices under the direction of two statewide organizations were approached during the course of this study to serve as recruiting sites.

In fall 2020, one statewide organization that provides community re-entry services to formerly incarcerated individuals through its satellite offices and affiliates agreed to participate as a recruiting site. The organization's executive director and case manager allowed me to recruit study participants from their client pools, and initial recruiting began through two suburban offices. The offices' staff posted study flyers (Appendix A) in their offices and made the flyers available to clients. I attempted to meet with the organization's clients via zoom to conduct recruiting meetings in August 2020 to present study information to them (Appendix B), but the

COVID-19 pandemic closed the organization's offices to group meetings. Clients who had seen the flyers during office visits and were interested in study participation were to make contact via email, text, or cell phone to learn more about the study. I intended to follow up with interested clients to screen them to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria. One study participant was recruited during this initial recruitment period. I spoke to the study participant via Zoom to ensure that she met inclusion criteria, read her the consent material, and offered to answer her questions about the study. I mailed her a physical copy of the consent form, which she signed and mailed back to me. I also scheduled her for the first of two virtual interviews.

Recruiting challenges brought on by COVID-19 hindered study recruiting through the first two offices selected as recruiting sites. I amended this study with Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board to conduct recruiting at additional offices under the statewide organization's supervision. After receiving IRB approval for the amendment, I expanded recruiting to two additional offices located in a suburban city and a rural town. Further discussions took place with the organization's executive director and satellite office case managers who regarding recruiting of study participants from their client pools in their satellite offices.

The continuing COVID-19 pandemic foiled attempts to meet with clients via Zoom recruiting meetings in October and November 2020. To assist with recruiting, the satellite offices' staff posted study flyers and made the flyers available to clients. Clients who had seen the flyers during office visits and were interested in study participation were to make contact via email, text, or cell phone to learn more about the study. I intended to follow up with interested clients to screen them to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria. No study participants were recruited from these two satellite offices.

Recruiting challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic continued to plague study recruiting through the first statewide organization's satellite offices, so I again amended this study with Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board to add a second statewide organization and its satellite offices to the study's recruiting sites. The second statewide organization also is a state-wide organization that provides adult offender voluntary reentry program services. I met virtually with three directors from two satellite offices located in urban areas and affiliated with the second statewide organization, and they all agreed to allow study participant recruitment to take place among their client pools. The continuing COVID-19 pandemic once again frustrated attempts to meet with clients via zoom in recruiting meetings in December 2020. Program staff at the two participating satellite offices posted study flyers in their offices and made the flyers available to clients. Clients interested in study participation were to make contact via email, text, or cell phone to learn more about the study. I intended to follow up with interested clients to screen them to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria. Three study participants were recruited during this time. I spoke to the study participants via Google Voice to ensure that they met inclusion criteria, read them the consent material, and offered to answer their questions about the study. I provided them copies of the consent form through their case managers, which they signed and returned to their case managers who scanned and emailed them to me. I also scheduled them for the first of two virtual interviews.

### ***Purposeful Sampling Scheme***

This study used purposeful sampling as its sampling scheme, for this sampling scheme most effectively fit the research questions, methodology, and research goals. The purposeful sampling scheme relied on the study inclusion criteria to identify potential participants who could contribute valuable data to this study's research questions.

The research literature provided context for this study's reliance on a purposeful sampling scheme for study participant recruitment. Researchers choose purposeful sampling when they want to select subjects who might offer the best perspective on the phenomenon of interest (Abrams, 2010). Purposeful sampling enhances understanding of the selected groups' or individual's experiences through the selection of "information rich" cases and contributes to theory and concept development (Devers & Frankel, 2000, p. 264). Purposeful sampling complements case study research and offers opportunities to study three types of cases that shed light on the phenomenon of interest: typical cases, "deviant" or extreme cases, and "negative" or disconfirming cases (Frankel & Devers, 2000b, p. 265). Because this study examined a phenomenon – the reentry experiences of justice-involved youth returning to schools following juvenile justice contact – purposeful sampling offered the best means for understanding the phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Purposeful sampling is not without risks, but the benefits this sampling scheme brought to the research questions and study purpose outweighed any risks its use entailed. A purposeful sampling scheme on its own might create bias and reduce the possibility of extrapolating or generalizing study results (Patton, 1999), but this study incorporated procedures to reduce the possible effects of bias arising from purposeful sampling. Those procedures will be described later in the chapter.

### ***Data Saturation***

Data saturation factored into the development of this study's methodology and drove decision-making about site selection and inclusion and exclusion criteria. I anticipated that four to eight subjects would provide enough data sources to reach data saturation, which Fusch and Ness (2015) characterize as sufficient data to replicate the study, attain new information, and stop coding because it is no longer feasible. Qualitative case studies typically rely on small

sample sizes, but data saturation can be reached with a small sample if the sample presents enough data for the researcher to establish all viable themes from the data collected. In other words, if the collected data contain both rich (high quality) and thick (high quantity) data that provide insight into the phenomenon, then the sample size generated sufficient data to answer the study's research questions.

To incorporate Fusch and Ness' (2015) guidelines, this study used a standardized interview protocol, included participants whose school reentry experiences deviated from theoretical outcomes, and excluded participants who might have had specialized knowledge pertinent to the phenomenon under examination. Because recruiting took place in coordination with staff from organizations that support community reentry for justice-involved adults, gatekeeper risk remained a possibility outside of my direct oversight and control. Even though the necessary involvement of these intermediaries created an inescapable gatekeeper risk, it is unlikely that organization staff members manipulated study participant access or involvement during recruiting, and study participants provided no evidence that led me to believe that they had been in any way selected by organization staff.

Because study participant interviews served as the principal method for collecting primary data in this study, I closely followed Fusch and Neff's (2015) recommendations to ensure that data saturation was reached while data collection integrity was maintained. Data were coded and organized in a spreadsheet to track data similarity. PhD program peers reviewed sample spreadsheets and coding schemes and provided me with their perspectives on data saturation. Study participants were interviewed twice with significant time between interviews to avoid having a single mood or emotion influence the data.

### ***Informed Consent***

In keeping with ethical research practices, this study adhered to informed consent recommendations and requirements to protect study participants (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000). All potential study participants who expressed interest in this study were provided a detailed informed consent form that Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board had reviewed and approved (Appendix C). The reentry organizations serving as recruiting sites provided study participants with copies of the informed consent form. I read the informed consent form to study participants after they had agreed to participate in this study, and I answered any questions that they had regarding the study. The informed consent form contained an explanation of the study's purpose; a description of the research goals; a summary of participant involvement; potential risks and discomforts; potential benefits to participants and others; guarantees of confidentiality; and emphasis about the voluntary nature of the study. The informed consent form also identified the following requirements and benefits of study participation: involvement in a minimum of two interviews and compensation for interview time at the rate of \$25 per hour to be paid as a gift card.

All participants who agreed to participate in this study received a copy of their signed consent form. In addition, the original and copies of all consent forms were maintained in a secure physical space to ensure confidentiality.

### ***Confidentiality***

I assumed that study participants might inadvertently reveal personal information about themselves or others, so during the study design phase, I incorporated protections for study participant confidentiality as well as third-party confidentiality during recruitment, data collection, and data analysis with multiple protocols to ensure anonymity and data security. I

relied on guidance from Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2000) who advised anonymizing participants and sites through pseudonyms and asking study participants if they would like to review their interview transcripts for potentially revealing information. In addition, the informed consent document contained language explaining the circumstances that could trigger a required breach in confidentiality.

To further protect study participant confidentiality, the following data security measures also were in place: 1). Study participants and the study site were assigned pseudonyms. 2). Identifying data were deleted or altered in transcripts, interview notes, and other documents arising from the study. 3). All study data were stored on a password-protected virtual drive and on a password-protected external hard drive. 4). All study documents were stored in a locked file cabinet in my home office.

Virtual interview sessions took place via Zoom or Google Voice and included only the study participant and me. Zoom interviews were video and audio recorded, and Google Voice interviews were audio recorded. All study participants agreed to the video and audio recording of their interviews through the consent process and consent form. One study participant elected to be interviewed via Zoom and used her personal computer at home for the interview sessions. Three study participants elected to be interviewed via Google Voice and used their personal cell phones for the interview sessions. I conducted interviews from my private home office. No data from the interviews were disseminated; this data were collected to inform my understanding of the study participant's responses to protocol questions and provide context for those responses. Study participant recordings will be destroyed per Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board requirements. I identified a data storage error that placed some interview recordings at risk of exposure, so I contacted Virginia Commonwealth University's

Institutional Review Board for guidance and took corrective action to ensure that study participant confidentiality was maintained. I also contacted study participants to inform them of the storage error.

The interview protocol questions asked the study participant to refrain from using their name, the names of other individuals, or identifying information for themselves or others during interviews. Study participants also were asked to review the anonymized transcripts of their interview sessions to ensure that they had the opportunity to ask the researcher to revise or redact information which they believed could infringe on their privacy. Participants also were allowed to request withdrawal of their data up to two weeks after they had reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy and completeness. No study participants elected to review their interview transcripts.

All potential identifiers in the transcripts such as cities, neighborhoods, schools, school divisions, ages, occupations, religious affiliations, and other personal information were removed from the transcript and replaced with placeholder text identifying the broad category the interview participant touched upon. For example, if an interview participant mentioned a specific high school name or mascot, the published/presented transcript would read: “I attended [high school], home of the [school mascot].” I followed the same procedure with all identifiers in all documents to ensure consistency.

Consent forms, researcher notes, and transcript hard copies were stored in my home office in a locked file cabinet. All study participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. The master list of participants and their pseudonyms were maintained in hard copy only and were secured in my home office. The master list will be destroyed after the researcher’s successful dissertation defense in summer 2021.

## **Method**

This section describes this study's semi-structured interview protocol and data collection procedures.

### ***Semi-Structured Interview Protocol***

I drew on Devers and Frankel (2000) guidance for developing and implementing this study's instrumentation, which consisted of a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) for data collection from study participants. The interview protocol was developed from this study's research goals and research questions, empirical studies identified in the literature review, and from labeling, social control, and field theories. It was further refined through a recursive process that took place during my literature review, theoretical framework development, research question formulation, study design, and data collection and analysis. Two PhD program colleagues who agreed to assist with peer debriefing also reviewed, critiqued, and supplemented the interview protocol.

Because I strove to create a tightly integrated study with a strong thematic thread linking literature, theory, practice, and policy related to the phenomenon under examination, the interview protocol continually evolved to maintain its alignment with the overall study plan. I also intended for the interview protocol to create a bridge between the research questions and study participant experiences. Study participants had broad latitude to interpret the interview protocol as they saw fit, which generated wide-ranging study participant responses and called for further clarification of the interview protocol. The interview protocol generated significant data, but initial data analysis revealed gaps and redundancies. The two to three week break between the first and second interviews with study participants allowed me time to review the data from

the first interviews and seek further clarification during the second interview to close gaps and eliminate redundancies.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

This study drew on data collected through one procedure – participant interviews – to investigate the study’s research questions.

**Participant Interviews.** This study relied on Turner’s (2010) standardized open-ended interview approach to ensure consistency among interviews and reduce researcher bias. This approach generated significant data, including data not directly relevant to this study’s research questions or research goals but essential to establishing study participants’ confidence that their experiences and voices remained centered in the research process. However, the volume of data produced during the first and second interviews led to challenges during data analysis and coding, which will be addressed later in this chapter.

My experience in journalism and law conducting interviews led me to believe that the interaction that study participants and I shared during the interviews would provide a context for the data collected through the interview protocol and serve as a secondary data source, which the research literature confirmed. The interaction that occurs between a researcher and a study participant creates meaning separate from the knowledge or information the participant shares in response to the researcher’s questions: “Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation, so to speak – as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 114). Thus, researchers should capitalize on the interviewer-respondent interactions and the knowledge produced through such interactions because the process of meaning production is just as important as the meaning that is produced. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) emphasized the need

for researchers to give interview process as much as importance as interview products. They write: “[Understanding] how the meaning-making process unfolds in the interview is as critical as apprehending what is substantively asked and conveyed” (p. 114). They also suggest that the interview process has as much importance as the interview product, and I found this observation to accurately reflect the interview experiences that I encountered with study participants. Our interactions during the first and second interviews led to a much more dynamic data collection process and produced richer, thicker data for analysis.

Each study participant attended two hour-long interviews. The first interview for study participants focused on the semi-structured interview protocol. I scheduled second interviews after I had converted audio recordings to transcripts through online transcription software, reviewed transcripts for accuracy, analyzed the raw data, and assigned codes to data of interest. The second interview for each study participant focused on the semi-structured interview protocol questions and probes that had not been fully developed during the first interviews and solicited study participant elaboration of responses collected during the first interviews. Approximately two to three weeks passed between the first and second interviews for study participants, which not only allowed me time to reflect on the data that I had collected during the first interviews but also allowed study participants time to reflect on their school reentry experiences and on the study protocol questions. The reflection period between interviews proved fruitful for data collection. In the second interviews, study participants expanded on the responses that they had shared in the first interviews and opened unexpected lines of discussion, which led to more detailed, nuanced data for further analysis.

The remote nature of the interviews limited secondary data collection that typically occurs through observation of the interview participants during the interviews themselves, but

this limitation had no significant effect on the interview data that I collected. My experience conducting remote interviews in journalism and law had prepared me for the distancing effect that remote interviews sometimes impose on the data collection process, so I focused on engaging study participants through the interview protocol questions and expanding on their responses through probes. During the second interview sessions, I clarified their responses where needed and confirmed my interpretation and analysis through member checking.

**Field Notes and Research Journal.** The research literature recommends the use of field notes to assist in data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2013), and I found this approach to be valuable in preparing for second interviews, during data analysis and coding, and for general note keeping during the research process. I created field notes during interview to capture nonverbal data such as vocal tone, pacing, and emotional language. I also noted facial expressions, body language, and demeanor for the study participant who participated in Zoom interviews. My field notes also included my observations and interpretations about events that I witnessed during the interviews and served as a raw data source for my research questions and research goals (Naff & McMillan, 2021). In addition to serving as a valuable data source, field notes that contain extensive detail and maintain accuracy also provide insight into the research process and thoughts and bolster a study's trustworthiness.

Based on the recommendations in the research literature (Naff & McMillan, 2021), I also created a dual-entry journal to record two categories of field notes: descriptive and reflective. The descriptive data omitted my interpretations and existed in an unstructured, uncategorized form. In contrast, the reflective data contained my subjective reflections and incorporated my thoughts, ideas, interpretations, speculations, and beliefs.

## **Data Analysis**

Qualitative researchers recognize the importance of transparent and systematic procedures for data processing that support valid and reliable inferences (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). To increase support for the findings derived from my data analysis and maintain transparency and research integrity, I have included detailed descriptions of the data analysis.

I approached data analysis as the systematic, organized examination of collected data to identify evidence that captures essential aspects of study participants' experiences and contributes to the research findings (Polkinghorne, 2005). I converted recorded interviews into transcripts with Otter.ai online transcription software and reviewed interview transcripts against the recorded interview to ensure their accuracy. I made corrections and clarifications where necessary and redacted or anonymized personal information inadvertently revealed by study participants. I fractured the data into units for analysis, and I categorized and coded the fractured data in a spreadsheet. I attempted to create the smallest data units possible while retaining the context and meaning of study participant protocol responses. I kept a researcher journal in which I debriefed myself during the data collection and analysis stages. As I began data analysis, I sought relationships that connected data, evidence, and findings and relied on Polkinghorne (2005) for guidance: "In constructing the research report, the researcher draws excerpts from the data to illustrate the findings and to show the reader how the findings were derived from the evidential data" (p. 138).

### **Data Content Analysis and Coding Categories**

The processed primary and secondary data consisted of study participant interview transcripts and researcher field notes. The naturalistic inquiry and constructivist paradigm used in this study supported the use of two content analysis approaches described by Zhang and

Wildemuth (2009) to develop coding categories: directed content analysis, in which data coding categories are drawn from theory, relevant research findings, and emergent themes identified during data analysis, and conventional content analysis, in which data coding categories are drawn from the raw data.

Initial data processing and analysis revealed broad topics, but it was more beneficial to categorize and analyze discrete data units to identify more specific themes worthy of deeper analysis. As Maxwell (2008) noted: “In qualitative research...the goal of coding is not to produce counts of things but to ‘fracture’ [...] the data and rearrange it into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and between categories” (p. 237). I approached data processing using Maxwell’s (2008) guidance to fracture and code the data that were collected during study participant interviews, recorded in my contemporaneous field notes, and collected in my reflective researcher journal.

The coding categories that I developed during research design followed a directed content analysis approach derived from the current study’s research literature, theoretical framework, research questions, and my personal and professional experience with similarly situated study populations. I anticipated that data would fit into the following categories: study participant background and history; juvenile justice system contact; school reentry impressions; stigmatizing labels; school-based relationships with adults and peers; extracurricular and co-curricular participation in athletic, social, and academic activities; access to school-controlled present and future social, cultural, and economic capitals; and school reentry educational outcomes.

As I processed the data during analysis and coding, I incorporated conventional content analysis to create coding categories to capture themes arising from the data. I categorized and coded relevant data extracted from the transcribed interview responses using a spreadsheet and

an initial set of organizational codes developed prior to conducting interviews. Substantive, descriptive, and theoretical categories emerged during data analysis and theory building, which resulted in the inclusion of more coding categories to better describe the data.

Data collecting, coding, and analysis led me to revise the coding categories based on emergent trends and themes. The coding category revisions collapsed social, cultural, and economic capitals into in a single category – educational benefits. I also found that study participants tended to identify aspects of their school reentry experiences that implicated social capital more than economic and cultural capitals, but I also noted that they recognized economic and cultural capitals as resources controlled by school personnel who had a significant effect on their relationships, school engagement, and educational benefits. The fluidity that existed among study participants’ impressions and characterizations of different capitals complicated the coding process and led me to include the educational benefits coding category to capture their experiences related to social, economic, and cultural capitals as they are embodied in academic, extracurricular, and social opportunities present in schools and controlled by school personnel.

A coding category for study participant policy and practice recommendations based on their personal school reentry experiences presented itself during interviews as an unanticipated coding category. All study participants described not only what they had experienced as justice-involved youth undergoing school reentry but also suggested different policies and practices that they believed would have helped them during their school reentry and would have likely contributed to more beneficial and successful educational outcomes. To accommodate this emerging trend, I created a “recommendations” coding category to capture this data.

## **Coding Challenges**

The most significant hurdle during data processing arose from the nature of the data itself and had its roots in this study's multiple case study methodology and data collection procedures. The data collection during the first and second interviews led to far more data than I had anticipated and created unexpected challenges for analysis and organization. The data's nature further complicated analysis and organization, for study participants' interview protocol responses contained significant context and overlap with multiple research questions. The complex nature of the interview protocol responses necessitated a revision to the data analysis plan and coding scheme to organize and categorize the data more effectively, efficiently, and accurately. I attempted to adhere to Devers and Frankel's (2000) recommendation that effective data organization contributes to effective data analysis: "Good qualitative data analysis relies on the ability to locate information and to keep that information in context" (p. 269). My data organization goal had to be balanced against my intention to ensure that study participants' voices remained centered in the study. To protect this study's descriptive and interpretive validity (Johnson, 1997), I chose to leave data embedded in its context during data coding, which led to larger data units than I had anticipated when I first planned my data organization and presentation structure.

## **Validity**

The concept of validity has created debate among qualitative researchers who have taken different views on its relevance and utility to qualitative research. For example, Tracy (2010) suggests that quality standards such as validity, generalizability, objectivity, and reliability as they are understood from a quantitative research perspective should not apply to qualitative research. The dynamic nature of qualitative research often leads researchers to launch their

studies before they have theories to situate their work, so universal qualitative criteria should guide their efforts toward their end goals instead of defining their methods: “I believe we can create a conceptualization in which qualitative researchers can agree on common markers of goodness without tying these markers to specific paradigmatic practices or crafts” (Tracy, 2010, p. 839).

Qualitative researchers have conceptualized validity in different ways or have suggested alternative concepts such as “trustworthiness, authenticity, and quality” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 122). This study relied on Maxwell’s (2013) conceptualization of validity as “the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 122). Qualitative researchers address validity through conceptualizations of validity threats, strategies to identify the plausibility of such threats, and plans to address them if they are plausible (Maxwell, 2013).

Validity in qualitative research can be subdivided into smaller concepts. Johnson (1997) identified three types of validity important to qualitative research: descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity. Descriptive validity includes “the factual accuracy of the account as reported by the researchers” (Johnson, 1997, p. 284). Interpretive validity requires “a window into the minds of the people being studied” (p. 285). Theoretical validity arises from “the degree that a theoretical explanation developed from a research study fits the data and, therefore, is credible and defensible” (p. 286).

In addition, conceptualizations of internal and external validity have relevance to qualitative research. In quantitative research, internal validity refers to how justified a researcher would be in inferring a causal relationship (Johnson, 1997). Causal relationships play less of a role in qualitative research, which focuses more on studying processes and testing possible

causal hypotheses and theories. External validity matters in quantitative research because researchers generalize quantitative findings to other populations and settings (Johnson, 1997). In qualitative research, generalizability usually is not the goal of the researcher, so external validity plays a less significant role. Where generalizability exists in qualitative studies, it applies to theory development that can apply to other cases (Maxwell, 2008). In contrast, some qualitative researchers argue that replication logic applies to generalizing from qualitative studies (Johnson, 1997). Replication logic describes transferability and supports external validity through the process of replicating a qualitative study's theoretical framework to similar phenomenon or findings in other populations and sites.

Even though an external, objective standard for validity in qualitative studies remains elusive, procedures exist to identify and address validity threats, check a study's validity, and ensure its trustworthiness (Guba, 1981) and excellence (Tracy, 2010).

### **Validity Threats**

While reviewing the research literature early in this study's development, I determined that researcher bias and reactivity were the most probable validity threats that I would encounter during my data collection and analysis. Maxwell (2013) observed that qualitative researchers are inherently a part of the study they conduct, which prevents these two validity threats – research bias and reactivity – from being eliminated.

Researcher bias typically takes two forms: selecting data to fit a researcher's existing theories and selecting data that “stand out” to the researcher (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). Because qualitative researchers are deeply engaged with their research subjects and setting, eliminating their “theories, beliefs, and perceptual lens” would be impossible and unwarranted (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). Johnson (1997) suggested that researcher bias can be offset by a researcher who

“actively engages in critical self-reflection about his or her potential biases and predispositions” (p. 284).

In contrast to researcher bias, reactivity entails a researcher’s conscious or unconscious influence on the study’s setting or subjects. Maxwell (2013) argues that reactivity is inescapable in the interaction between researcher and study participant because “what the informant says is *always* influenced by the interviewer and interview situation” (p.125). He advises researchers to identify how they might influence a subject’s interview responses and analyze the possible effects such influences have on the validity of inferences drawn from the subject’s responses.

Maxwell’s (2013) suggestions for dealing with researcher bias and reactivity incorporate the understanding that qualitative researchers are part of the studies that they conduct, which prevents these two validity threats from being completely eliminated. Instead, Maxwell suggests that threats must be addressed directly and publicly by identifying how researcher bias and reactivity influence study conduct and conclusions and working toward eliminating the consequences of such influences. To confront the threats posed by researcher bias and reactivity, I have attempted to provide as much transparency as possible in this report, specifically addressing my researcher positionality, data collection procedures, data analysis approach, and findings to provide insight into the study’s progression from concept to completion.

### **Validity Tests**

Qualitative researchers rely on validity tests such as member checking, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, researcher memos, rich description, and triangulation to bolster validity. This section explains this study’s use of these tests at different points in the research process and describes the contributions the tests made to study validity.

### *Member Checking*

In qualitative research, researchers might inadvertently impose their beliefs and interests on the research process to the detriment of their participants' experiences and voices. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend the use of member checking to improve the rigor of qualitative research. Member checking (also known as respondent or participant validation) counters researcher bias by including study subjects in reviews and verifications of transcripts, artifacts, researcher interview notes, or analyzed data (Birt et al., 2016).

Member checking encompasses diverse procedures, including returning verbatim transcripts to study subjects for their review and comment; sharing transcripts with study subjects during follow-up interviews; discussing research analyses with study subjects during follow-up interviews; conducting member checks during focus groups; and reviewing data analyses with subjects (Birt et al., 2016). Sharing transcripts during follow-up interviews not only provides researchers a chance to verify data with participants but also empowers them through meaning co-creation with researchers. Reviewing data analyses might be difficult unless researchers present their analyses in forms that their participants find accessible. Data analyses also might distance study participants from the original data but offer opportunities to collect additional data or challenge emerging analyses and theories.

Member checking's value arises from its use to improve qualitative research rigor and validity, but its appropriateness to a qualitative research study depends on the methodology of the study in question. Because so few researchers explain the purpose and method underlying their use of member checking in their studies, Birt et al. (2016) argued that researchers should report this information. Omitting detailed explanations regarding the extent of participant involvement in member checking also reduces the research value. Birt et al. (2016) write: "If the

levels of engagement in member checking are not reported, we risk tokenistic involvement of participants and exaggerated claims about the transferability of the data” (p. 1806).

Member checking for occurred during the second interviews with study participants. After the first interview, I reviewed and noted transcript passages and preliminarily coded data that required additional clarification or explanation to ensure that I had accurately described and interpreted the data. I began the second interviews by reviewing the protocol questions, transcript passages, coded data, and preliminary data analysis with study participants to ensure that I had not misunderstood or misinterpreted their responses. Study participants clarified their responses, corrected my misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and spontaneously expanded on the data they had provided during their first interviews. I also offered to provide study participants with clean copies of their interview transcripts. Only one study participant requested that I provide her with copies of her interview transcripts, and she did not express any concerns about the transcripts in follow-up communications.

### ***Prolonged Engagement***

Prolonged engagement arises from a researcher’s “lengthy and intensive contact with the phenomena (or respondents) in the field to assess possible sources of distortion and especially to identify salencies in the situation” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 77). Prolonged engagement should provide a researcher sufficient interaction over a long enough period to give the researcher insight into study participants’ culture, experiences, and perspectives (Manning, 1997). This study’s data sources and collection procedures were selected to establish prolonged engagement with study participants to provide the best opportunity to establish ethical relationships with them, ensure that they received care and consideration, and collect high-quality data from them about their school reentry experiences.

### ***Peer Debriefing***

Peer debriefing occurs between a researcher and trusted colleagues with whom the researcher engages in regular discussions about the researcher's study's methodology, findings, or other study features (Manning, 1997). The colleagues should be knowledgeable about the research methodology used in the researcher's study but should not be engaged in the researcher's study. The colleagues should challenge the researcher's beliefs and preliminary conclusions to ensure that the researcher has considered multiple explanations during data analysis.

Two fellow PhD students assisted me with peer debriefing to ensure that I remained aligned with the research questions at the heart of the study, approached data analysis with clarity and focus, and reached findings consistent with an objective analysis of the data. I provided my colleagues with anonymized interview transcripts and my code book to check the utility of my coding categories and to provide a triangulation test for my data coding. I also exchanged weekly text messages with them about the progress of my research and thoughts and questions I had about different aspects of the project. We also met via Zoom for discussions about the progress we were making on the different stages of our studies, and I discussed interpretations and analyses related to my study during these meetings. My colleagues provided me valuable feedback during the study stages and served as anchor points who kept me from drifting into researcher bias, overly subjective data analysis, and narrow data interpretation.

### ***Researcher Memos***

Creating an audit trail through written or audio journals, memos, logs, data collection chronologies, and data analysis procedures (collectively described as "researcher memos") supports qualitative research trustworthiness by ensuring that the research process contains

significant transparency. Researcher memos allow independent auditors to review the research process and findings to ensure that results reflect the participants' experiences, not the researcher's preferences or biases (Wahyuni, 2012). In addition, independent auditors can review researcher memos to determine whether data grounds the research findings; whether logic supports the inferences; whether coding categories have appropriate structure; whether shifts in inquiry and methodology have justification; how much researcher bias exists; and what strategies were used to increase credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I compiled research memos from study conception to dissertation completion and relied on them to track my early explorations of the research literature, study development, recruiting plans and site selection, data collection, data analysis, and dissertation drafting, among other tasks.

### ***Rich Description***

Rich description increases a qualitative study's trustworthiness by presenting readers with copious details about a phenomenon, setting, themes, or individual so that it creates a sense of "verisimilitude" for readers (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). Readers who encounter rich description in a qualitative study often experience a connection to the described events through similar events that they might have experienced themselves or that they could imagine themselves experiencing. Rich description enhances a qualitative study's transferability of findings because it provides details and context for findings that study readers may apply to other similar settings (Tracy, 2010). Creswell and Miller (2000) recommend that researchers employ a constructivist perspective "to contextualize the people and sites studied" (p. 129) and to write with as much detail as possible to develop rich descriptions.

My professional background gave me insight into crafting narratives that contain rich descriptions, for I often used a detailed descriptive approach for longform feature stories on

people, places, and events during my career in journalism. I also used a detailed descriptive approach for drafting narratives in legal documents to paint a visual picture of the events that formed the underlying cause of action or defense. For this study, I strove to capture as many details as possible through in-depth interviews to present the most complete picture of the experiences that study participants shared about themselves as justice-involved youth who had undergone school reentry.

### ***Triangulation***

Even though this chapter has touched on triangulation as means to bolster a qualitative study's validity through multiple methods, data sources, and researchers (Mathison, 1988), this study's methodology warrants a more detailed explanation why triangulation proved almost impossible to incorporate into this study's final design. First, the COVID-19 pandemic limited the methods available for collecting data, so I could not rely on multiple methods for triangulation. Second, the single source of data collection (study participant interviews) also eliminated multiple data sources for triangulation. Third, the pandemic-imposed isolation made it difficult to meet with colleagues and rely on their insight and feedback for triangulation, though I was able to test my data coding against a sample anonymized transcript that they coded using my code book.

In this study's pre-COVID-19 design, I had hoped to incorporate triangulation as a means to bolster the study's validity, but the revised design had to accommodate insurmountable challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and, unfortunately, triangulation only played a limited role in the revised design.

### **Ethical Challenges Associated with Vulnerable Populations**

Working with vulnerable populations presents significant ethical challenges for researchers. This study relied on participants who had been members of a vulnerable, marginalized population as adolescents – justice-involved youth. Thus, all steps in the study adhered to the highest ethical standards to ensure that participants suffered no harm.

Conducting a study with a population who had been held in residential facilities as justice-involved youth and had been remanded to secure facilities as adults presented potential ethical pitfalls such as: “(a) ethical blindness, (b) offenders’ moral status, (c) offenders’ vulnerability, (d) cultural/social differences, (e) researcher vices and virtues, and (f) assumptions about disorders and offender treatability” (Ward & Willis, 2010, p. 405). Four guiding principles underpinning behavioral sciences research serve as a counterweight to these potential ethical pitfalls: independent review processes, informed consent, harm minimization, and privacy and confidentiality (Kalmbach & Lyons, 2003). Researchers suggest that guiding principles such as compassion and respect for others combined with justice, beneficence, integrity, and autonomy supplement ethical codes and expand their scope to incorporate unique and unexpected ethical challenges that arise from research with vulnerable populations such as justice-involved youth and adults (Ward & Willis, 2010).

This study’s examination of the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth could not have occurred without interacting with study participants who had undergone the process that I intended to investigate. I relied on my professional and personal experiences working with justice-involved youth and adults to guide my research. I ensured that study participants remained centered in this study and experienced as much control over their participation as possible. I believe that I succeeded in earning their trust and empowering their

voices because they often shared significant and revealing details about their lived experiences that enriched the data collection, data analysis, and, ultimately, this study's findings.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter described the study design, participant identification and recruitment, data collection, data analysis, study timeline, validity threats and tests, and ethical challenges. The data analysis provided insight into the school reentry experiences of the four study participants who underwent school reentry as justice-involved youth and will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### Introduction

This chapter describes the study participants, emergent themes derived from the data, and connects the emergent themes to research questions. First, the chapter introduces study participants through case descriptions that provide details about their lives, school perceptions, and school relationships before their juvenile justice system involvement. Second, the chapter identifies three emergent themes that arose during data analysis. Third, the chapter explains the relationships among the emergent themes and research questions.

Case descriptions describe study participants' lives prior to their juvenile justice system contact, including their family and community contexts, their school perceptions, and their relationships with teachers and peers. The schools and other educational programs that participants attended before, during, and after their contact with the juvenile justice system are described where information was available. Three study participants' school reentry experiences and juvenile justice system involvement often followed nonlinear courses, so they experienced significant transience in their placements in public schools, residential facilities, foster families, alternative education programs, and job training programs. In addition, the stories that participants shared about their school reentry experiences often intersected with multiple research questions, which presented challenges to organizing and contextualizing results. Because centering study participants' voices and lived experiences was a goal, narrative flow and substantive content was prioritized over research question organization and contextualization.

Data analysis identified three emergent themes arising from study participants' school reentry experiences. First, school reentries following juvenile-justice system involvement were life-altering events with lifelong effects. Second, institutional and human barriers hindered

school reentry and integration/reintegration into school communities. Third, school personnel acted as gatekeepers who controlled access to educational benefits. These three emergent themes will be described in detail later in the chapter.

The emergent themes identified during data analysis connect to the study's five research questions. To facilitate the presentation of findings, this chapter will introduce a theme and explain its connection to the research question or questions and findings associated with it. A brief summary will conclude each of the three emergent theme sections.

### Case Descriptions

Four participants (Table 1) comprised the cases for this study: Stephanie, Trayvon, Marcus, and Henry (pseudonyms). Each participant attended two one-hour interviews, with two to three weeks

passing between interviews. All interviews were either video and audio recorded, or audio recorded. Transcripts were

Name	Gender	Race	Current Age	Grade Reentry	School Completion	School Type
Stephanie	Female	White	29	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Graduated	Public School
Trayvon	Male	Black	32	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Graduated	Alternative School
Marcus	Male	Black	38	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Reoffended	Alternative Education Program; Residential Vocational Program
Henry	Male	Black	51	7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Dropped Out	Alternative School

produced through an online transcription application (otter.ai). Transcripts were reviewed against the original audio recordings to correct and clarify erroneous, unclear, and incomplete transcriptions. Redundancies and other recording artifacts captured by the online transcription application were removed from the transcripts. Unnecessary placeholder phrases that had no

substantive value to the final clean transcript also were removed, but participants' speech patterns, word choices, and unique voices were retained. Transcript passages that inadvertently identified specific geographic locations, neighborhoods, school names, school division names, school personnel names, and other private information were removed or redacted. All deletions, redactions, and clarifications to the transcripts had no effect on the substance of the study participants' responses.

### **Stephanie**

Stephanie identified as a white female who is 29 years old. She attended a large suburban high school in a mid-Atlantic state about 25 miles outside of a large metropolitan city. Her encounter with the juvenile justice system occurred during her senior year in high school. She was arrested and charged for altering the price on merchandise at a retail store. Stephanie denied committing the unlawful act that led to her arrest and adjudication but said that she pled guilty to resolve the charge against her and move on from the event.

Stephanie described her life as being "privileged." As the child of a successful property developer in a region where new subdivisions and large single-family homes were in high demand, her family enjoyed financial security and housing stability. The public high school that she attended drew its student body from the affluent subdivisions surrounding it. Approximately 2,000 students in grades 9-12 attended the high school. Stephanie said that her high school was known for its reputation as an elite, well-funded, academically rigorous high school, and she recognized that having an affluent family and living in an upper-middle class community gave her access to educational benefits through her high school that she would not have had in other schools. She said:

I'm from a rich community, and I was a spoiled little rich kid. I'm not gonna lie. And I went to at the time, [suburban high school] is where I went, and at the time that was considered the more high class, richer, peppier kids. Our school had a lot of money. We had a big, nice stadium, nice football fields. We had a very good GPA average. Our teachers were rated good. We had a bunch of extracurricular stuff that a lot of other schools didn't have.

Stephanie recalled that her progress through elementary, middle, and high school had been an uninterrupted string of academic achievements, athletic and extracurricular activity participation, and positive, supportive relationships with school personnel. She also identified the important role her family played in supporting her education and the advantage her support system gave her. She said:

My mom really pushed us to get an education, to have a life that she didn't get the chance to have. And me being surrounded by people that encouraged me, pushed me, looked at me like I was above everybody else, it puts you in this certain world where you're on a track for success, like your mind narrows to one thing, and you have all these goals that you set, and you have a higher chance of reaching them, because your support system around you is greater.

Stephanie believed that she enjoyed a privileged position in her school and in her community. She played softball and cheered, worked as an office aide, related well to school personnel, participated in dual-enrollment courses, and maintained above average grades. She planned to attend a private university and study criminal justice.

Stephanie viewed school as an enjoyable experience and a means to achieve her post-secondary education and career goals. Her high school offered advanced academic programs and

dual-enrollment classes through a partnership with a local community college, and Stephanie took advantage of this opportunity to begin accumulating college credits.

When I got to my senior year, I wasn't in classes like a normal student. I could have graduated a year early. And I chose to stay and take a college credit course. I took Business Finance, and then I would go for one period a day, and that would give me the college credit through [community college]. And then I would be able to go to work for the remainder of the day. ... So school was a positive thing for me. And I knew what I wanted, I had career goals, and I was doing what I needed to do to obtain them.

Stephanie took great pride in her academic achievements and considered herself a capable student with a supportive family that emphasized the importance of doing well in school.

Stephanie had strong relationships with school personnel through what she described as her long-standing commitment to producing quality academic work. She also noted that her family encouraged her academic achievements and school attendance, which she said motivated her to achieve. She said:

I was one of those kids that did extra credit. I always turned in my work ahead of time. I made sure that I would read, reread, and make sure it was to my standard. I guess you can say I was a perfectionist when it came to that. I had a strict household. My grades were a big thing that was rewarded for, obviously, you know, straight A's, or my attendance or the way I acted.

Stephanie valued the positive relationships that she enjoyed with school personnel, and she acknowledged the opportunities that such relationships presented to her. She had invested in building her reputation as an academically successful student with a committed family to support her. She repeatedly used the term "privileged" to identify her status, and she believed her

privileged position in the school community gave her access to educational benefits unavailable to other students.

Stephanie's contact with the criminal justice system began when she was arrested and charged with altering the price of an item at a clothing store. Because of the item's value, she faced a felony charge. She recalled that she had an unclear understanding of the process that she faced, but even though she insisted that she was innocent, she accepted a plea deal to resolve the matter. After her arrest, Stephanie returned to school, completed her senior year, and graduated, but her contact with the criminal justice system and her new status as a justice-involved youth had significant effects on her final months in high school.

### **Trayvon**

Trayvon is a 32-year-old Black man who attended an urban middle school in a metropolitan mid-Atlantic city when he came into contact with the juvenile justice system. He enjoyed school but found his middle school to be challenging, with too many disruptive students in classes too large for effective learning. He said: "It was overcrowded classes, a bunch of students, 30 plus students, a bunch of talking and confusion. It was really not a good environment to learn in." Trayvon's journey through school was further complicated by his involvement with the foster care system. He and his older sister had entered the foster care system when he was five years old, and they remained together in foster care until he was 13-years-old. At that point, Trayvon's life entered a traumatizing and painful phase when an individual connected to his foster family began sexually assaulting him.

Trayvon's placement in foster care and later involvement in the juvenile justice system made him a "dually-adjudicated youth" – a child who had simultaneous involvement in the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system (Abbott & Barnett, 2016). Research on dually-

adjudicated youth indicate that they face additional challenges and require more support and intervention to ensure successful school reentry. Trayvon's journey through foster care, secure facilities, public schools, and an alternative school reflects the experiences that many such youth encounter as they attempt to navigate multiple systems with different expectations and requirements.

Adapting to different environments with often contradictory and competing services and demands became second nature for Trayvon, who learned early that he had to assume different personas to survive. He described the roles he had to adopt when he was in middle school, noting that assuming different roles in different environments presented challenges that he had difficulty understanding at his age. He compared the process to a poem he had encountered in school – “We Wear the Mask” by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

I would have to be this different person going to school and when I leave school, I gotta be a different person. Paul Dunbar wrote a poem called “We Wear the Mask” and it's kind of like hats. When I leave the house, I'm a father, a boyfriend. Now I got to put on a different hat. I'm an employer. Now I'm an uncle. Now I'm a brother, you know. This wearing multiple hats at a young age and not knowing how to switch those hats, not knowing how to compartmentalize, not knowing how to be different in different environments, it was a hell of a wakeup call.

Trayvon's placement in foster care brought him into contact with caseworkers and other adults who had been assigned to work with him, but he noted that they often treated him more like he was a problem than a child in need of help. He recalled a social worker who shamed and humiliated him after he and his sister appeared on television in a recurring news segment about local children in the foster care system.

[The case manager] told me I'll never be successful. I couldn't believe she even said it. Can you believe that? I'll never forget her name. I'll never forget her. I'll never forget that woman. She was so mean and nasty. We was on [a local news segment featuring youth in foster care]. We was at [a recreational boat center], both me and my sister. After the little [local news segment] episode, she said, "I don't think no one will adopt you." She said, "I don't think you'll be successful in life." She was just so rude.

Trayvon said neither he nor his sister was adopted, and he eventually pushed for a different foster care placement. He noted that his desire for a different foster care placement came with a cost, for it led to his separation from his sister. He said:

I kept asking for requests to move because I was feeling as though the foster parents weren't treating me right. But my sister, on the other hand, she wanted to be more stable. So they came to the conclusion that it'd be beneficial to keep my sister stable and just move me, so they had to make that decision for the betterment of my sister, which actually was the best move because she in essence went to college and all that.

Trayvon believed that his foster parents had reaped the benefits of his care without providing him basic necessities. He ran away from his foster care placement and found himself living on the streets in a high-crime area of his home city, doing what he believed he had to do to survive.

He said:

So my running away, I think that was based around a couple of things. One of them was the frustration and anger of being in foster care. The second one was the way that the foster parents were treating me at certain instances. At that point, I knew I was absolutely supposed to get money every two weeks, I was supposed to get a clothing allowance every month. I wasn't getting none of that. ...So I went to the streets. [The city's high-

crime area] embraced me with open arms. I'm talking about the streets. I was sleeping in the streets, selling crack, selling weed, just trying to survive, trying to find myself.

The conflict between Trayvon and his foster parents over basic necessities was part of the reason he ran away. The sexual assaults that he suffered also factored into his decision to leave his foster care placement. He said:

So around the age of 13, I was sexually molested. ...I really think now, thinking back, that was one of the reasons I ran away and didn't want to be bothered because the embarrassment, the shame, and the yoke of him touching me and doing things to me and me not being able to express what's going on and not being able to tell someone. So I guess my behavior spoke volumes because I couldn't decompress, so to speak.

Trayvon believed that the sexual assaults that he endured contributed to the behavior that would eventually bring him into contact with the juvenile justice system.

Trayvon said his focus at 14 was not on his academic achievement but on his social life as a teenager. He said: "To be honest, at 14 years old, I was more trying to look fly coming to school, get the girls, and smoke weed. So at that point, my attendance was sad, my ability to focus was not good." Even though Trayvon concentrated more on social activities and peer relationships, he said that he also strove to do well in his classes but struggled with controlling his behavior. He said that he had been placed on an IEP for a learning disability, but he added that it was later revised to reflect his difficulty regulating his emotions and responding appropriately to others. Trayvon believed that his academic performance and behavior was not significantly different than that of his peers. He recalled that most of his friends earned average grades, acted up in crowded classes, and focused on social activities and friendships.

Trayvon recognized that his peers exerted powerful influences on his behavior and attitudes. He again recalled Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" to describe the power he believed peer pressure exerted on his life and his choices, pushing him toward different roles and life goals.

That poem...teaches us that we cannot be the same in every situation. But when you're younger, you just think about one thing one way. But when you transition into adulthood, you slowly understand that you have to wear different hats....That experience was one of great confusion, because I wanted to be a thug, then I wanted to be successful, then I wanted to go to the army, then wanted to sell drugs, then I wanted to be a robber, then I wanted to work for the government. You know what I'm saying? And all this was based on who I was around, what they were talking about, what were their interests. Peer pressure is so, so real. I don't care what nobody say.

Trayvon often felt trapped between peers and school personnel, with pressure from both groups pushing him to adopt conflicting attitudes and behaviors that they valued and respected.

Trayvon's peers engaged in unlawful behavior and pursued personal enjoyment, while his teachers promoted academic success and personal responsibility. In his view, his peers had a more significant influence on his behavior than his teachers.

Going to school with individuals that have already experienced crimes was a wakeup call for me because they were doing things that I didn't have no inclination of. Selling drugs, carrying your gun, robbing people, stealing cars, all types of crime. So it was kind of a gravitational pull, like on one side, you got the teachers pulling you. And then on another side, you got your peers and your classmates, and from my experience, your peers have more of an influence than teachers do.

Trayvon expanded on the internal and external struggles that he encountered as a youth caught between pressure to engage in unlawful acts and pressure to adopt responsible behavior.

I didn't know who I was at 14, and I'm trying to find myself. But then I have these [school personnel] telling me that I'm so, so smart. I'm successful, I am somebody, but then I got Bobo over here – I'm using that quote-unquote, fake name – I got Bobo over here that's like, "Come on, let's go get some money." I'm like, "How?" "Let's go rob this" or "Let's go sell this." So it was kind of a pull in every direction. So I was suffering from an identity crisis going to that school. That's no lie.

Trayvon noted that the pressure to conform to the expectations and behaviors of his more reckless peers placed him in an untenable position. If he resisted participating in unlawful behavior with them, then they would have assigned him stigmatizing labels like "snitch," "punk," or "coward." But joining them in their unlawful behavior exposed him to the risk of formal and informal primary and secondary sanctions from the juvenile justice system and other social institutions. He also knew that unlawful behavior carried significant personal risk. He said:

You don't want to say no, because you don't want to get pegged at this scared kid or the snitch or the guy that's weak. So you have to bite your tongue and be like, "Damn, I don't want to do this." But in order to be accepted, I have to go along with my friends, but that acceptance can be your whole life. Like I know friends that went out on a joyride and caught 25 years...lost their whole life.

Trayvon believed that the immediate social consequences that he faced from his peers for avoiding unlawful behavior outweighed the abstract and, in Trayvon's view, unlikely formal sanctions that he might face from the juvenile justice system. He also believed that he had no

choice but to accept the roles that his peers thrust upon him, for to reject their expectations for him placed him at physical risk in his neighborhood. He said:

I always wanted the label as tough guy, the street guy. ...But what I professed in a classroom was education, knowledge, power. So I was a real smart student. But I wanted to be accepted so bad because of labels. So I had to do things that I knew as a juvenile weren't of my best interest, solely just to be accepted by my peers. Because I knew if I didn't do X, Y, and Z, I'd be looked at in a different light. And I wouldn't have that acceptance. And that acceptance is key. People don't understand the importance of acceptance in the inner city. I'll break it down to you. If I'm looked at as a coward in the school system, and I have to walk down a certain street, I'll get picked on because I'm a coward. You understand that, right? So in order to not get that name coward or punk, I have to do something that I normally don't want to do to show that I'm willing to do something if someone does something to me. So in essence, I can honestly say, a lot of juvenile hands are forced to do things that they normally wouldn't do, just to be accepted and feel safe in their own neighborhood. Because if they don't do these things, they'll get bullied, they'll get targeted, and they'll become victims.

Because so many of his classmates and peers had been involved with the juvenile justice system, Trayvon recognized its pervasiveness in his life. It became entwined with school and added an unexpected elective to his learning – unlawful behavior. Trayvon faced a situation that created significant cognitive dissonance. He knew peers whose unlawful behavior had led to their arrests, injuries, or deaths, but he believed he had to engage in unlawful behavior to achieve acceptance. He said:

Unfortunately, the outcome for a lot of my classmates were either incarceration or death. So a lot of our students were at-risk youth with behavior problems. So by the time I went to that school, a lot of my classmates were either already in the juvenile justice system or had run-ins with the law. So at that point, basically, you got a bunch of young juvenile criminals going to school and teaching each other shit about crime.

For Trayvon, the arrest that led to his involvement with the juvenile justice system brought together multiple state and local agencies and had a mixed effect on his wellbeing, but Trayvon believed that the social service and juvenile justice system personnel had been committed to helping him. He said:

I was scared, I was scared. I was worried, depressed, hopeless. Those are the feelings I can say I was feeling during that time....So what they did because I was a juvenile and because I wasn't found guilty of the charge, they sent me to [a residential mental healthcare facility]. They were trying to help, just trying to help with the mental and emotional issues.

Trayvon's detention at a residential mental healthcare facility lasted longer than he had anticipated. His initial 28-day stay turned into a four-month odyssey, but he said that he benefitted from the support and security that the facility staff provided him.

### **Marcus**

Marcus is a 38-year-old Black man who attended a suburban middle school outside of a metropolitan mid-Atlantic city. He had three younger sisters and two older brothers. His father was incarcerated from 1989 to 1999, and he had little contact with him. His brothers also came into contact with the juvenile justice system, were adjudicated delinquent, and were placed in residential facilities. He recalled close relationships with his sisters whose company he enjoyed.

Marcus described his mother as a committed advocate who supported his participation in baseball, encouraged him to strive for academic success, and admonished him when his behavior failed to meet her expectations. He said:

She would make sure that I stayed on task as far as making sure my homework was done and make sure that I went to baseball practices. Whenever I did do something that she disagreed with, she tried to discipline me by sitting down and telling me what was right from wrong.

Marcus recalled spending afternoons and early evenings at a neighborhood recreation center with his sisters, an activity that he enjoyed a great deal. He provided little information about his peer group but identified “people, places, and the wrong things” as contributing to behavior that would later bring him into contact with the juvenile justice system.

In elementary school, Marcus received special education services, which he credited with helping him succeed. He identified one-on-one support teacher support and small class sizes as beneficial to his early school successes. When he entered middle school, he found it more difficult to continue his academic achievement, which he believed stemmed from larger class sizes and less individualized attention. He also struggled to stay on task and chose to socialize more with his peers, but he recalled that he came close to achieving honor roll despite the challenges and distractions. He said: “I missed it by one letter grade. I had a C instead of a B. I was very proud, and that’s what motivated me to like school.”

Marcus recalled his relationships with school personnel in elementary school with fondness, noting that his teachers supported his learning and promoted education as a pathway to future success. He also enjoyed the extracurricular activities that he experienced in elementary school. He said:

[Teachers] catered to me quite well. I guess they had that model “leave no child behind.” I know growing up, where I grew up, going to elementary school from third to fourth grade, you was taught how to swim over at the high school. Then going into middle school, it was just more so like the education part. It was time to start learning. It was time to start planning the future.

In middle school, Marcus had close relationships with school personnel and recognized their efforts to support him and encourage his education. He viewed school personnel through a positive lens and described them as helpful and invested in his success. He said:

They helped me whenever I needed help. I was never really told “no,” when I asked about something I didn’t understand. They always made sure we went to the library on time. You know, just pretty much tried to educate, to give us the proper knowledge that we need to carry on.

Marcus characterized his elementary school experience as positive, but he also noted that he had experienced bullying and had received suspensions for defending himself. He said: “From elementary school I used to get picked on. I felt I used to get bullied, so I learned how to protect myself. So I stayed suspended a few times in elementary, but I overcame that.”

Marcus described his school peers as diverse, saying “most of my friends were like a rainbow. You know, you had people from all over, all over the world, especially the elementary and middle school that I went to.” He recalled that his relationships with his peers were positive and fulfilling, but he also noted that he faced occasional bullying. He said:

I pretty much got along with everyone until I felt like I was getting bullied. I pretty much got along with everyone. I had a few guys that I hung out with and everything. A lot of

them was good guys, good kids. You always had a couple bad apples...you know, the kids, groups, or whatever. I was pretty much fair with everyone.

During his final year in middle school, Marcus, who was 13-years-old, came into contact with the juvenile justice system for threatening an assistant principal. He was placed in a residential facility for 21 days. After he was released from the residential facility, he was barred from returning to the classroom and was reclassified as a homeschool student, but he received instruction alone in a separate room at school from a teacher assigned to him. He continued receiving one-to-one instruction until he was adjudicated delinquent and placed in a residential facility. After he was released on parole, he briefly returned to an in-school program for vulnerable students in a public high school, but a parole violation ended his participation after a few short weeks. After Marcus was released from a residential facility for the parole violation, the school board for his school division denied him readmission to public school and referred him to an alternative school program. Marcus had no interest in the alternative school program, though he said that he regrets not exploring that option when it was presented to him. He said:

I did do school over at the juvenile detention as well. But their schooling was very small.

We did do what I was supposed to be caught up on as far as me being in the ninth grade. But again, it was pretty small. So you didn't have what being in the outside community at high school felt like. And then after that, they told me I couldn't return to any more public school. I had to go find something like, I don't know the name of the program and the school, but it was more so, I remember certain names, [alternative school name].

Marcus believed that the threat he made in eighth grade against an assistant principal was the event that started his repeated contact with the juvenile justice system and, eventually, the adult justice system. He said:

It seems like me being incarcerated for the incident with the principal led up to me winding up having continued incarceration as a juvenile and within my years of early school. ...So, right now...it makes me kind of feel like the very first time that I was incarcerated at that age as a juvenile kind of led up to a pattern of me going back to incarceration and not having to focus on my proper education and stuff. Being incarcerated took an effect or how I paid attention in school.

Further juvenile justice system contact prevented Marcus from completing his education in public school, but he continued his education while he was held in residential facilities. He passed the tests for a general educational development (GED) certificate the same year that he would have graduated from high school had he attended a public or alternative school.

### **Henry**

Henry is a 51-year-old Black man. He grew up in a metropolitan West Coast city. His parents were divorced, and his mother raised him and his siblings. He characterized his parents' divorce as having a significant effect on his life as a child because it led to his mother returning to the workforce, which reduced her ability to support his education as she had done during his parents' marriage. His parents' divorce also led to the breakup of his family. He said:

[My mother and father] divorced and separated. My father took some of my sisters to Northern California with him and left me and one of my siblings with my mother. My mother now was no longer able to provide early enrichment learning, because now she has to put food on the table for us. So she went out to work.

Henry described his community as impoverished and overpoliced, with the threat of law enforcement contact always present. He recalled multiple friends and family who had law enforcement contact as juveniles or adults. School competed with the poverty, violence, and

gang culture in Henry's community, and those competing attractions lured him even further from education. He said:

I grew up in a predominantly African American community that was impoverished. The immediate environment outside of my household was filled with gangs, gang members. It was gang-related activity, it was prostitution, it was drug related activity, it was just a culture of violence. As a youth, I was very impressionable at that time. So I would get out and see, like the ghetto superstars in the form of drug dealers, in the form of gang members, and they have all this respect, they have all the influence, all this gear that cost a lot of money, that caused a lot of women to gravitate towards them. So now this became the competition to the classroom. I was looking at them, as opposed to looking at, we could say literature and art, we could say science, we could say mathematics. My interest was no longer in the classroom. I was mesmerized by some of the ghetto superstars, as they call them, that I was exposed to.

Henry identified these "ghetto superstars," as he described them, as having far more influence over his developing sense of self than other role models in his school and community.

Henry described his early education as plagued by underfunded schools and draconian disciplinary policies, both of which he attributed to economic disparities affecting schools in the majority minority community where he lived. He believed that overcrowded, rundown schools staffed by indifferent school personnel contributed to his disruptive behavior and increased his disinterest in education. He said:

The classrooms were dilapidated, it was filled with unruly participants, and nine times out of 10, you just acted out...I was subjected to paddling. I was subjected to detention. I was subjected to several things that led to me being suspended. During that suspension,

education was extended. In other words, if I were suspended for three days, I was not given an educational package that would require me while at home to stay up to par with my educational lessons.

Henry believed that school suspensions without academic support adversely affected his educational progress and his relationships with his peers. He said that his academic struggles made him a target of his peers who bullied and humiliated him, which only deepened his shame and embarrassment. He said:

When I returned back to the classroom, I clearly remember in the fourth grade, where we were learning fractions, division, multiplication, and things of that nature, just math being the subject I was behind. And so what I would do to hide my shame, my embarrassment, I would act out, I would be disruptive. I was the class clown. And I mainly was doing this because I was embarrassed. I was ashamed to really allow other individuals to know that I was behind in the educational process and my academics were not strong or even up to par to just be accepted or compete with the other students. And so I didn't want to face that shame. I didn't want to face that embarrassment from the other children because they were ruthless.

Henry described a seemingly inescapable cycle of academic struggles, disruptive behavior, and disciplinary actions that he faced in school. His school detentions and suspensions led to further academic struggles. His academic struggles triggered bullying from his peers, and he responded with disruptive behavior to avoid shame and embarrassment. His disruptive behavior led to further detentions and suspensions, which only increased his academic struggles. He said:

They would just call you dumb, so in order to escape, I would act out. And I would end up in the principal's office, and I would get paddled, and then I would receive a referral

saying that I had to stay in detention for maybe an hour or two after school. While in detention there was no tutelage, there was no substitute teacher coming in, inquiring why I was behaving the way I was behaving or instructing me in lessons, so I just sat in that room for approximately an hour or two after school, or sometimes I had to come in on the weekend.

Even though Henry attended school consistently, he recalled that school personnel placed few expectations on him to learn and provided no remediation to help him overcome his academic struggles. He said that his poor academic progress seemed not to matter and that he was promoted to the next grade each year without fail. He said:

Although I can remember third, fourth, fifth grade, I was not equipped to graduate to the next grade level, but, somehow, I just made it through. At the end of each semester, at the end of each term of schooling, all of us would just move on from the third grade to the fourth grade to the fifth grade to the sixth grade, until eventually, I got to the seventh grade, and I went to [school name] junior high, which was a year-round school. That's when they discovered that my academics were not up to par. And we could say it was because, you know, I had been in juvenile hall, in the group home for a moment. But they just sent me off into this alternative school where there was nothing but other unruly individuals that were not interested in learning.

Henry believed the combination of incomplete, weak academic preparation combined with his juvenile justice system contact led to his placement in an alternative high school that offered even fewer educational opportunities than the elementary and middle schools that he had attended.

Henry recognized that his defiance and disrespect disrupted classes, encouraged students to act out, prevented students from learning, and angered his teachers. He recalled that the anger they displayed toward him for his behavior fueled further defiance and triggered more punishment. He described the punishment that he received as abusive and humiliating, which only made him feel more isolated and unwanted. He said:

[My behavior] became offensive to them. Because now you have maybe one, two, or three unruly students in the class disrupting maybe eight or nine, if not more, other students who had potential to learn. I was disrupting them. And so when a teacher would admonish me or warn me about my behavior, I became confrontational. It led to me being pulled by the ear...being paddled in front of all the other students, being sat in a corner, being yelled at. All those things were part of my reality in the classroom. So my thought process from that point, and I can remember my first teacher that was mean to me, it like arrested my mentality towards all teachers. So, in my little mind, because this had occurred with one teacher, I had that confrontation toward each and every teacher that I encountered.

Because Henry felt disconnected from his family following his parents' divorce and from school personnel following their responses to his disruptive behavior, Henry invested himself in his peers. He described how his peers played a significant role in his life, living in the same neighborhood, attending the same school, and sitting in the same classrooms. He said:

My classmates were some of the same children that I was playing in the same sandbox with outside of the classroom, outside of the school. We lived next door to one another in projects. I lived in one section of the projects, and I'd say between three or four sections,

my whole class, all my classmates, within those sections. So it was like we were always together. And if one thing happened to one of us, then it happened to all of us.

Because Henry found school personnel to be disengaged and often hostile, he viewed them as adversaries and his peers as allies in a struggle for dominance in the classroom. He and his peers plotted ways to harass school personnel and disrupt their instruction. He recognized that his actions interfered with his and other students' educations, but he also believed that school personnel had demonstrated no interest in him as a student.

And so we were coming to terms with making little plots and plans as to what we were going to do to ditch school to actually put tacks in the chair so the teacher could sit down on them. We're doing all types of little things. ...[I]f you're looking at it from a juvenile delinquent's perspective, it was unhealthy, but if you are just looking at childhood experience being accepted, you know, being a part of the group without the peer pressure, you know, it was ideal, but it wasn't productive towards academics.

Henry was 12-years-old during the summer between sixth and seventh grades in school when he encountered the juvenile justice system. He was arrested and charged with larceny. The arrest left him shaken and afraid. He said:

I was terrified. It was a very traumatizing experience to come in contact with law enforcement, especially growing up in a community that was impoverished and plagued with police brutality. So I was very apprehensive, apprehensive of law enforcement because of what I had witnessed others being subjected to. So when they came and took me away, me being unfamiliar with the juvenile detention process, I thought maybe I would never return to my community, to my home, my family. And then when I was placed in the juvenile hall center, I was stripped out – that was extremely humiliating – I

was given a uniform, and I was placed in a small cell for approximately 24 hours before they took me to the main complex.

Henry remained in the residential facility for 30 days before he was released to his mother's custody. He remained with his family until he was adjudicated and found delinquent. He was then held in a residential facility for about four months before he was placed in a foster care group home. He enrolled in a public junior high school, but even though he had attended school while he was incarcerated, he had not met the academic requirements to enter seventh grade.

### **Emergent Themes**

Three themes emerged during data analysis and connect to this study's research questions. First, study participants described their school reentry as life-altering events with lifelong effects (research questions 1 and 5). Second, study participants encountered institutional and human barriers to their school reentry and integration/reintegration into school communities (research questions 2 and 3). Third, study participants viewed school personnel as gatekeepers who controlled their access to educational benefits (research question 4). The following sections describe the elements of the three emergent themes, connect them to the study's research questions, and illustrate them through study participant responses.

#### **Theme One: School Reentry as a Life-Changing Event with Lifelong Effects**

The first theme that emerged from the findings was the immediate and lasting effects that school reentry had on justice-involved youth during an impressionable developmental period (adolescence) in their lives. Study participants described their school reentry experiences as emotionally fraught, pivotal experiences that not only defined their educational outcomes but also shaped their future life courses.

Stephanie, Marcus, and Henry reentered or entered public or alternative schools or alternative education programs as justice-involved youth, a status that led to their stigmatization, isolation, and alienation. Stephanie found herself exiled within the school community through secondary sanctions. Henry found himself transferred to an alternative school that ignored his education needs. Marcus found himself segregated from the school community through placement in an in-school alternative education program. Stephanie and Henry recalled feeling betrayed by school personnel who they believed had abandoned them when they needed their support and involvement. Even years or decades after their school reentry experiences, they described the anger, frustration, loss, and sadness that they felt during their school reentry. Marcus seemed to feel a sense of loss about his brief school reentry experience and his placement in an alternative education program. He expressed more enthusiasm for the residential vocational education program that he attended, but he believed that he might have had a different life course if he had experienced a more support during his school reentry. In contrast, Trayvon recalled a positive, supportive reception when he entered an unaccredited alternative school for justice-involved youth. He described a sense of belonging that he had not experienced in public school or foster care, and he shared stories of academic, athletic, and social successes.

The educational outcomes for study participants varied. Stephanie graduated from her school after returning, but she seemed to have pursued graduation as an act of defiance. Even though she obtained her diploma, it seemed to mean less to her because it was tainted by the negative emotions that seemed to dominate her school reentry. Trayvon also graduated from the alternative school he entered, but he believed the school's lack of accreditation reduced the value of his diploma and limited its utility. However, his enthusiasm for the social and emotional support that he received outweighed his concerns about his diploma's value. Neither Marcus nor

Henry graduated high school, but both eventually obtained their GEDs. The disruptions that Marcus encountered during his adolescence seemed to leave him with more ambiguous feelings about obtaining a GED instead of a high school diploma, but he emphasized that he had obtained his GED about the time he would have graduated from high school. Henry's reflections on his incomplete education had led him to a deep intellectualization of what he described as school system and school personnel indifference and hostility embedded in marginalized, poorly resourced, and overly policed communities.

***RQ1: How do justice-involved youth experience school reentry?***

Study participants all returned to either a public school (Stephanie), alternative schools (Trayvon and Henry), or an alternative education program within a public school followed by a vocational education and training program (Marcus). Despite their different genders, races, socio-economic statuses, family relationships, residences, and community characteristics, all study participants shared similar school reentry experiences.

**Stephanie's Reentry.** Stephanie's arrest and entry into the juvenile justice system devastated her and led her to a difficult reentry to her public school. After she began navigating the juvenile justice system's complex series of hearings, evaluations, and other requirements, she began to sense how her new status adversely affected others' views of her. She anticipated that her status would also affect how school personnel would view her as well. Their reactions surpassed her expectations and kindled frustration and resentment toward the school and school personnel, who she felt betrayed her by withdrawing the support that they had provided her before her arrest. She said:

Once I got through it and got past all that portion of things, I, in a sense, gave up. You know what I mean? Things didn't mean the same to me. I didn't look at situations the

same. I felt like I threw away something that I worked so hard for. I guess at that point, I just got frustrated trying to explain the situation or explain my story a million times over and over again. And I felt like no matter what I said, it wouldn't matter anyways. So I think I was just numb to it.

She believed that school personnel had no interest in the factors that she believed might have contributed to her arrest, and their disinterest in her situation combined with what she interpreted as betrayal of their previous relationships increased her isolation and alienation. She said:

Being down the road that I've been down now and having the disappointments along the way...I take full responsibility and full blame for everything that I put myself through, all the trouble that I got into. But my biggest thing is people. People don't look at the root of why, you know, kids messed up, or why people go down the path that they do. There's always an underlying problem, whether it be home situations, or mental health situations, or some type of underlying cause for why they either want to fit in, or why they choose to make the decisions they do. ... There's always some type of reason or situation behind what really happened that causes people to make the decisions they do in life. That's anybody. Nobody's going to just go out and say, "Okay, tomorrow, I think I want to, I want to try a drug, or I want to jump off a bridge," like you don't just go out and do that. There's something that builds up to that.

At first, Stephanie internalized the ostracism that she encountered from school personnel and believed that she deserved the formal and informal secondary sanctions the school and school personnel imposed on her for her involvement with the juvenile justice system. Her isolation from the school community and loss of educational benefits the school and school personnel

imposed on her eventually festered and fueled her anger. As her alienation deepened, she became embittered toward education and self-destructive in her behavior.

**Trayvon's Reentry.** Trayvon described his residency in a residential facility as beneficial because he believed it helped him better understand why he often struggled in school and identify what he needed to change to become more successful. In contrast to Stephanie, Trayvon looked forward to returning to an alternative school setting. Before his arrest, he had not found a positive life course, and his foster care placement had been fraught with challenges. He also believed an alternative school would better serve his newly identified educational and behavioral needs. He hoped the alternative school would give him the long-term stability that he had not found in the foster care system and serve as a source of personal affirmation that he had not found in public school. He said:

I did [want to be at the alternative school]. Because during that time in my life, I didn't really have a lot of stabilities. I was trying to find myself. I found at school was the only place where I could get positive accolades. Like, who wants to hear negative shit about themselves? Nobody. So when I go to school, that was the place for me to hear, "Hi, how you doing? You look good. You answered that question good. Oh, you're very, very smart." Just positive affirmations. People love to hear that. So people love to hear positive things about themselves. So no one's gonna hear negative things about themselves. So we're gonna gravitate towards that. So I gravitated towards that because who don't want to hear good things about themselves? You know what I'm saying?

From Trayvon's previous experience with public schools, he knew that they had failed to meet his needs, and he believed that the smaller classes the alternative school offered would reduce his acting-out behavior and increase his academic recognition.

It would have been worse [if I had gone to a public school]. I wouldn't have an opportunity at a public school because I would have been overlooked. Because in a big classroom setting, I can be quiet and not do my work or be talkative, because I don't know how to do the work, and I want to divert my attention from that. So I really believe that small class settings are really important.

Trayvon found that the alternative school personnel addressed his academic needs and supported his emotional growth. They also encouraged him to participate in the school community through extracurricular activities and contribute to its operation as a paid office aide.

**Marcus' Reentry.** The event that resulted in Marcus' first contact with the juvenile justice system led to significant disruption in his education with multiple placements during the years that followed. While he awaited adjudication for threatening the assistant principal, he was removed from his classes and received independent instruction from a teacher assigned to work with him in his middle school's career center. He believed that the individual academic instruction was beneficial to his education, and he enjoyed the one-on-one instruction. He said:

I had to meet with [the teacher] at the career center. He was pretty great actually. He explained what needed to be done, how it needed to be done, as far as math, social studies, science...and if I needed any help with anything I didn't understand, he was nearby.

Marcus' recalled that his time in individual instruction lasted about two weeks, and he said the daily isolation and separation from his teachers and peers eventually led to him losing interest in school. A parole violation ended his independent instruction and led to his transfer to a secure facility for approximately 11 months. He continued his education while incarcerated and credited smaller classes and more one-to-one instruction in the facility school as beneficial to his

education. He said: “I started to receive better grades. I was making the honor roll every semester.” He completed eighth grade and began ninth grade in the correctional education program in the secure facility. He recalled that the correctional education program’s organization and structure benefitted him and that it presented him with an education which he believed would have been similar to what he would have received in a public school. He said:

I did actually pretty good. I paid attention. It was the proper education that I needed, during that beginning stages of early freshman year of high school. I did other activities, building, building grounds, literature, arts, reading, proper reading skills, and everything.

As Marcus prepared to leave the secure facility and return to public school, he thought about what returning to school meant for him and his future. He looked forward to attending high school and seeing peers he had known from middle and elementary school and from his community. He also believed that he would acquire the education that he needed to start a career or attend college. He said:

It was a second chance, a second opportunity, to get it right. If I want to further my education, to build myself, you know, knowledgeable enough to have the skills and education to live out here and possibly further my education in college.

After Marcus completed his juvenile justice supervision, his school division refused to place him in the general school population and regular education classes in public school. Instead of encouraging Marcus to return to public school, the school division suggested that he attend an alternative school. When he declined placement in an alternative school, the school division assigned him to an in-school education program for vulnerable youth, many of whom had had juvenile justice system involvement. He said: “I was isolated from a regular class. I was placed into a class called [alternative education program]. Some other students were in there with

me...who had been incarcerated as a juvenile or made some wrong decisions along their juvenile path or steps or whatever.”

Marcus joined the in-school alternative education program late in the spring of what would have been his freshman year. He found the transition from the correctional education program to the in-school alternative education program to be disruptive academically and socially, for, unlike his peers who began their freshman year together in September, he had to adapt to existing instruction and integrate into established peer groups. He said:

I was supposed to start the year of schooling in September. I didn't start school until March of the next year. ...So with that, school was pretty much about to be over within a few months, from March to June. So, you know, that's a lot of schooling, but the schooling that I described did travel with me from [the secure facility]. So I guess that I was caught up with a lot, but they wasn't teaching the same thing to me in [the secure facility]. ...We wasn't cutting into no frog at [the secure facility] like in high school, you get what I'm saying? Because I started in the middle of the semester, I felt like I was missing out on a lot.

Marcus noted that the correctional education program curriculum was significantly different than the public school to which he returned, but he enjoyed the greater academic freedom and learning opportunities that he encountered. He said:

I felt like I was getting older, classes were larger, you had to do more to focus on the ideas that were being taught. On your own, you had to discover the problem, they gave you that opportunity to discover the problem on your own, solve the problems on your own. I started to do biology, dissect frogs and everything. That was quite fun.

Marcus recalled that he received little support during his transition from the secure facility to public school, which he believed created a challenge to resuming his education and receiving the services that he needed to successfully reenter and complete school. He said: “Had [school personnel] gone about it a little different, I think it would have helped me more because then I would have had a chance to really focus on what I was lacking in education and what skills that I had.” He also recalled that school personnel ignored his academic success in the correctional education program in the secure facility, which he found frustrating and disappointing. He said: “None of that was never talked about. It was never looked upon as far as me making the honor roll or anything. ‘Oh, we’re proud of you. You know, you’re very intelligent, and you’re an easy learner, you’re a fast learner.’ None of that was discussed.” He also recognized that he lacked the academic skills he needed to succeed and noted that school personnel never assessed his ability. Instead, they relied on academic records that followed him from the correctional education program.

Marcus noted that he was unprepared for the greater freedom he found outside of the secure facility school and that his transition from middle school to high school followed a very different path than his peers. He believed that a counselor, caseworker, or therapist assigned to guide his school reentry would have helped him better understand his responsibilities as a student and would have exposed him to more social and extracurricular opportunities, which he thought would have increased his likelihood of successful reentry. He said:

Coming out of [the secure facility], it was different. Here it is dealing with more people, more rules, changing classrooms. I was allowed to have snacks or soda in class where I did my work, it wasn’t like, you know, elementary or middle school, that wasn’t the case. Some of the rules change, you know, the hallways is bigger, of course, and longer. You

know. With the relationship part, as far as with the adults there, I didn't really have security guards in the high school hallways, but no security guards in the middle school hallways or elementary. The janitors are what you got.

Marcus repeatedly identified challenges that returning to school late in the academic year presented him. He said:

I didn't really know a lot of people, you know, and I was starting right around the middle. So I missed a few things. I felt kind of lost when the teachers explained things. I didn't understand what they were talking about. I felt like I was missing out on a lot.

Marcus believed that the most significant reentry challenges that he experienced arose from his fragmented educational path following his contact with the juvenile justice system and his need for more support and encouragement during his transition.

**Henry's Reentry.** After Henry was released from a secure facility and placed in a group foster home, he enrolled in a junior high school in a more affluent school division than the previous school division where he had attended school before his contact with the juvenile justice system. Henry was impressed with his new junior high school's available resources. He also recalled the dedication and competency that school personnel displayed. He said: "In this area, they had resources. In this area, the teachers engaged you, the teachers really extracted information from the student. And they wanted to identify critically, how did they come to the solution." The school environment was unlike Henry's previous schools, and he felt unprepared and out of place. He was only enrolled in the new junior high school for about three weeks before he began expressing his frustration with the academic demands that were placed on him. He believed the inadequate education that he had received in the schools he had attended in the school division serving his home community left him unprepared to succeed in junior high in

what he described as a more academically challenging environment. He responded with defiance and disrespect to hide what he believed to be academic inadequacies. He said:

The first thing I felt was shame because I didn't know how to read, didn't know how to write. And to hide that, I masked it with anger. And so when a teacher called me to the board and said, "Hey, would you do this algebra equation?" I refused to come to the board. And so now, the teachers, the whole lesson had attention on me, and it was like, "Well, Mister, would you please come to the board, and walk us through this process, or allow us to go through this process." My response was adversarial. It's like, "'F' the process, 'F' you, 'F' the students." I don't want anything to do with this. I want to go. I'm running now from myself.

Henry recalled that his outburst in algebra class led to a conversation with his algebra teacher who initiated contact with school administration and Henry's group home counselors. Henry had hoped that school personnel would help him overcome his inadequate education and achieve success, but they decided to transfer him to an alternative school where they said he would receive additional academic support. Henry believed that school personnel pursued his transfer to remove him from their more affluent, academically rigorous school because he was a student who had academic and behavioral issues. He said:

The teacher didn't send me out of the class. He waited till the class ended to talk to me. And I was still unresponsive, I was not receptive towards his communication. And so he walked me down to the principal's office. They had a conversation with me, and they decided after speaking to one of the group home counselors that the junior high school, the public sector, was not a good fit for me, that I should be placed in an alternative school where I could receive, you know, the attention that was required to help me get

back up to par. So I wouldn't feel the way I felt in a public setting. And as I said, when they put me in alternative school, none of that, you know, the theory that they had, it didn't amount to facts. It was horrible.

Henry's reassignment to a year-round alternative school in a different neighborhood placed him in what he described as daily danger. Henry was a member of the Crips gang, and the alternative school was in Blood territory. He said:

Truthfully, I felt afraid. Because this alternative school was located in a rival gang related neighborhood, me being a Crip. Now I gotta step into the alternative school that was filled with Bloods. So now my ability to learn is compromised because I'm more looking over my shoulder. I'm more concerned with the rival gang members than a potential classmate that I could hook up with, I could deal, I can learn. [unintelligible] I stayed there, I think maybe like, four to six months. Each and every day I went there, of course, I had to fight one or two guys. But once that was realized, I was pretty much accepted. When, you know, the acceptance came, I didn't really look over my shoulder as much.

Henry recalled that he attended the alternative school for six to eight months before he dropped out. He said that the alternative school provided him no educational benefits, so he saw no value in continuing to attend.

### ***RQ1 Conclusion***

Study participants' reflections on their school reentry experiences seem to indicate that they encountered formal and informal barriers erected by school divisions, schools, and school personnel. One study participant reentered her home school, but three out of four study participants were redirected from their home schools to alternative schools or alternative education programs. Stephanie's established school relationships, existing school bonds, and

accumulated personal and family capitals had almost no mediating effects on her school reentry. Trayvon returned to an alternative school, so he had no established school relationships, existing school bonds, or accumulated personal and family capitals, but the alternative school's focus on justice-involved youth seemed to mediate his reentry. Marcus reentered public school through an alternative education program within a community school, but the program's isolation limited his contact with the greater school community. In addition, his juvenile justice system reentry resulted in his removal from the alternative education program. Henry found himself not only removed from his home school but also from his home, and he experienced school reentry twice – once at a junior high school in an affluent school division and then through transfer to an alternative year-round school.

Study participants' school reentry experiences illustrate how schools and school divisions approach justice-involved youths' return to school. Stephanie reentered the public school that she had attended for four years prior to her juvenile justice system involvement. Her reentry demonstrated to her the fragility of the reputation that she had built over years of academic, athletic, and social achievements. She found her school to be a cold, unwelcoming environment that actively punished her for her arrest through a series of devastating secondary sanctions. Trayvon's return to an alternative school contrasts with Stephanie's return. He encountered a welcoming environment that seemed not only better prepared to acknowledge his status but also to support his education. Marcus' chaotic school departures and entries left him to drift through his education with no sense of rejection or acceptance in any program he entered or reentered. Henry's school reentry gave him a place to get off the streets, but he faced danger from rival gang members and enjoyed little to no academic instruction.

***RQ5: How do justice-involved youth perceive the relationship between their school reentry experiences and their educational outcomes?***

The final research question examines the educational outcomes of study participants and describes the paths they followed to complete high school, obtain a high school equivalency certificate, or abandon school altogether. Stephanie and Trayvon graduated high school. Marcus received career-related certificates and a GED. Henry left school but obtained a GED and continued his education as an adult.

**Stephanie's Educational Outcome.** Stephanie's anger at school personnel became the defining emotional experience of her senior year in high school. She repeatedly characterized school personnel as dismissive of the accomplishments and reputation that she had achieved before her juvenile justice system involvement. She believed that school personnel defaulted to preprogrammed stereotypes that they held about justice-involved youth instead of engaging with her as a person. She said that the anger that she experienced arising from the ostracism she encountered fueled her alienation and eventually became the filter through which she viewed the world. She said:

I was mad at myself, mad at other people, mad at the way it happened. I think that ended up being one of my main things to go to: blaming other people or getting mad for no reason, just because what happened to me was a big thing. I lost sight, and, in essence, I guess, taking responsibility fully. I would just get mad to the point where I would blame everything on everybody. And it's not right. I would lash out, and naturally it was always somebody else who was responsible, or it was somebody else's fault or somebody else's decision that caused me to do things.

Stephanie identified her juvenile justice system involvement as the beginning of a series of lost opportunities that would plague her for almost all of her adult life. She committed herself to graduating but believed she was driven more by spite than pride. She said:

I still maintained. I still graduated. I didn't try as hard. I didn't put as much effort into it. Because I felt like at that point, there was no...there was no point. I still didn't make below a C, and very few of those. But I just felt like everything that I had to work toward, the career that I wanted, and I chose in life, was something that I couldn't have any mistakes, no blemishes, no mistakes, no tarnishes. I was I was going to be a criminal justice major, psychology minor, and my internship was actually going to be right here at [location redacted]. And at that point, I felt like I got something that I wanted so hard in life, and I really didn't have any other dreams or goals. I mean, I was young, you know, I was 18. I felt like my whole life was shattered and falling apart. ...I didn't realize that I still had a whole life ahead of me to make better choices and better decisions.

The reception Stephanie encountered when she reentered school drove home how strongly she had been stigmatized and how significantly her stigma affected her relationships with school personnel and the opportunities they allowed her to pursue. She acknowledged that her expectation that she would be considered innocent until proven guilty had proved to be naïve, but she had not expected the rejection she received.

If I would have had the people to support me, going forward in this whole thing, I don't think the outcome would have been the same. It's like I lost all of that support. And I guess when they'd seen, okay, well, these people just kind of turn their back on her, she's guilty. It's like I said previously: You're not innocent until you're proven guilty; you're guilty until you prove you're innocent.

The university that had accepted Stephanie before she became a justice-involved youth withdrew the acceptance offer, but Stephanie enrolled in a local community college after she graduated high school. Even though the community college was not her first choice and did not offer the programs she had hoped to study, she saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate to the people who she believed had lost trust in her that she was indeed worthy of their trust. She said:

The only positive thing for me was, once I finally got through the hurdle and tried to get people to take a chance to understand and try to put their faith or trust back in me, I finally had the opportunity to go to a technical school. It wasn't a big university, but I did go to [college name redacted]. It was regaining the trust that I lost... it was probably the most positive thing for me, to be able to rebuild a relationship with some of the people that I lost.

The ostracization, isolation, and alienation Stephanie encountered during her school reentry continued into adulthood, creating almost a seamless overlap between the treatment she received as a justice-involved youth and as an adult offender. After Stephanie completed high school, she had drug-related encounters with the criminal justice system, further derailing her post-secondary educational attainment and costing her access to financial aid programs that restricted individuals convicted for state or federal drug-related criminal offenses. Her battles with state and federal officials to obtain financial aid to attend school left her angry and frustrated but even more deeply aware of the secondary sanctions imposed on individuals who become involved with the juvenile justice or adult criminal justice systems.

I've had to fight them, tooth and nail to be able to, to go back to school. And I feel like they just label me as the type of person. Well, you know, even if we do give her a degree, she's not gonna be able to use it. So why waste our time? You know, I have the money to

pay for it myself. You know, if you want to waste your own money, fine, they'll let you waste your money all day long. But you have no government assistance. There's no government assistance to help felons go back to school. None. ... there's no type of government assistance to help felons go back to school, and I just, that's not fair, you know, those are the people that you should, you should try to help, you know, if you let them further their education, or go to a technical school or something, get some type of career, you know, maybe the chances of them reentering the system will be less. You know, I just don't understand that.

**Trayvon's Educational Outcome.** Unlike other study participants, Trayvon recalled a positive school reentry experience. He believed that his status as a justice-involved youth led to his reassignment to a school that met his unique needs. He noted that school leadership and school personnel knew of his status but encouraged him to overcome his belief that his status defined him. He also recalled that school leadership and school personnel integrated him into the school community through academic and extracurricular activities and supported his personal and family needs through a paid parttime job and other assistance. He described the alternative school community as a family and believed that the school community's investment in him led to his successful school completion. He said:

In reality, I'm not even supposed to be alive. I'm supposed to be in jail. But because of the help that I had, I was able to navigate and maneuver through all that BS. I was still able to come out on top with my life, a job, and being able to be in society and enjoy the world. So that's the blessing. If I didn't have the help, I don't know where I would be. I honestly don't. So that's why I seem so passionate about it. Because I know for a fact that the help that the school gave me changed my life.

**Marcus' Educational Outcome.** Marcus' educational path took many turns after he first encountered the juvenile justice system during middle school. He continued his education as a home-school student and then in a secure facility. He returned to high school through an alternative education program for vulnerable youth, but a parole violation led to his return to a secure juvenile facility. His continued involvement in the juvenile justice system led to his school division's decision to offer him placement in an alternative school that focused on at-risk youth, but he had no interest in attending an alternative school. Marcus enrolled in Job Corps to avoid serving "juvenile life" – incarceration in a secure facility until he reached 21 – and as a last chance of obtaining academic and vocational credentials that he believed would benefit him as an adult. He said:

I had violated my probation again, and it was a serious violation because I was with a friend of mine who was murdered, and I was out past my curfew. So the decision was to go to Job Corps or to do juvenile life. Of course I chose to go to Job Corps. ...The paperwork filed for me to enter into Job Corps didn't show that I was on any probation or anything, because we wasn't allowed to be on probation and be inside of Job Corps.

He completed vocational certificates but left the Job Corps camp after a few months. He recalled that he had valued the program, but he had lacked the focus and patience that he needed to take full advantage of the opportunities it presented him. Even though he failed to complete the full Job Corps program, he obtained a certificate in retail sales. He said:

So I'm a certified retail sales worker. I participated in a lot of other activities. Culinary Arts. I can't remember the educational part. I did resign. I didn't graduate. I resigned. But it was a very great experience. And that also reminded me of like, college. I stayed up on the campus. It was pretty, pretty large campus, not too large. They had a lot of

construction trades. Brick mason, heavy equipment operator, welding shops, carpentry shops, nursing classes, other trades like that. . . . That's what the program was pretty much based upon, for those that you know, can make it in the community, you know, you sign up for Job Corps, and it gives you the opportunity to better your skills in life, experience some good trade, you know, put some skills under your belt that you can use out here. You know, in this world. In different fields in life.

Even though Marcus failed to complete the full Job Corps program, he noted that the program provided him skills that he valued and positive encounters that he welcomed.

After leaving Job Corps, Marcus continued engaging in behavior that led to more interactions with the juvenile justice system, and he again returned to a secure facility. He eventually obtained his GED through a program in the secure facility where he resided. He noted that he received his GED about the same time he would have received his high school diploma. He said: "I didn't feel like I was missing anything. It's just that I wasn't, you know, part of the schooling system that's out in the community and today's society." Marcus believed that the correctional education he received was equivalent to a public school education, but he recognized that he had limited access to educational benefits that students in public schools received.

**Henry's Educational Outcome.** Henry left school before he graduated. The alternative school he attended provided few incentives beyond safety and meals for him to stay. He saw more opportunities on the streets than he did in the classrooms, so he chose to follow a path that he believed offered him more success than school offered him. He said:

I wasn't equipped to learn at a seventh or eighth grade level. I probably was operating at a . . . I want to say second or third grade level. And so some of the stuff that was placed on

the board in the public junior high school, it was like trying to comprehend an advanced foreign language. And going there, you know, just listening to a teacher talk crazy. And that's what I grew up with. You know, that was like, it was almost like a party. That was the problem.

### ***RQ5 Conclusion***

Study participants identified challenges arising from their status as justice-involved youth that affected their school completion.

One study participant reentered and completed her education at a public high school, but she believed her status isolated her from the school community and reduced her access to educational benefits. Stephanie viewed the isolation and alienation that she experienced during her school reentry as an unjust response to her diminished status as a justice-involved youth and recommitted herself to completing her secondary education to disprove school personnel's perceptions of her. She also noted that she was driven by anger arising from her belief that school personnel had abandoned her and intentionally isolated her because she was involved with the juvenile justice system.

One study participant reentered and completed his education at an alternative high school, and he recalled significant positive engagement with the school community and school personnel who ensured he had access to educational benefits, but he also identified school personnel who viewed him as having a lower status because of his juvenile justice system involvement. Even though Trayvon thrived at the alternative school and eventually graduated, he later learned that it had not been an accredited school. The revelation left him wondering what value his high school diploma might have had for him had he attempted to continue his education immediately after high school.

Two study participants reentered an alternative high school and an alternative education program embedded in a public high school, but neither study participant graduated. They recalled limited engagement with school personnel and limited access to educational benefits. Henry transferred to an alternative school, but he believed school personnel in his new school had no interest in the students. He also believed that he had no access to educational benefits, so he eventually abandoned school to engage in unlawful behavior on the streets. Marcus returned to school through an alternative education program housed within a community school, but it became little more than a brief stop on his chaotic educational journey through community schools, secure facility schools, and a Job Corps training camp. He eventually obtained a GED while he was incarcerated.

### **Theme Two: Institutional and Human Barriers to School Reentry**

The second theme that emerged from the findings was the seemingly intentional institutional and human barriers to school reentry that justice-involved youth confront. Even though study participants reentered different school environments (public school, alternative schools, and an alternative education program), they identified school policies and practices and school personnel actions that made school reentry more difficult for them. The barriers that they encountered varied in form and intensity, but they all served similar exclusionary functions.

Institutional barriers occurred at the division, school, and classroom level. For Henry and Marcus, formal school division policies and practices shifted them to an alternative school and alternative education program, restricted their interactions with school personnel, and reduced their educational opportunities. Trayvon also encountered formal school division policies and practices that directed him to an unaccredited alternative school. He gained personal social and emotional benefits from the school placement, but the diploma he earned had a diminished value.

For Stephanie, formal and informal school policies and practices made her an outcast in her home school, negatively affected her relationships with school personnel, and reduced her educational opportunities.

Study participants recalled school personnel who seemed to target them for secondary sanctions required by exclusionary school policies and practices, but they also identified school personnel who supported and encouraged their school reentries. The seemingly conflicting experiences that study participants described illustrate the two roles that school personnel might play as institutional agents. Stephanie recalled multiple school personnel who created barriers to her school reentry. She identified a coach who cut her from the softball team, a program supervisor who dismissed her from a dual-enrollment course, and school administrators who stripped her of her office aide position. She also recalled an English teacher who withdrew from their close relationship but offered support and encouragement from a distance. Marcus described alternative education program teachers as helpful but uninvested in his school reentry, but he identified a baseball coach who complimented his throwing arm and encouraged him to try out for the baseball team. Henry recalled indifferent or openly hostile school personnel who only existed in his school reentry memories as faceless institutional agents who took disciplinary action against him or withheld educational opportunities from him. But he also recalled a teacher who praised his handwriting and encouraged him to think highly of himself. Trayvon remembered an administrator at the alternative school he entered who pushed him to overcome his juvenile justice system involvement and pursue academic, athletic, and social achievements. He described school personnel as an extended family and believed his administrator created an atmosphere of acceptance and support.

Study participants' encounters with institutional and human barriers seem to indicate that formal and informal exclusionary policies and practices enforced by school personnel acting as institutional agents reduce the likelihood that justice-involved youth will achieve successful school reentry. The positive experiences that study participants recalled with school personnel provide a more nuanced explanation for the complex roles that they play as institutional agents. School personnel who enforce exclusionary policies and practices against justice-involved youth do so with the institution's authority. They have institutional support to impose secondary sanctions on justice-involved youth that stigmatize, isolate, and alienate them, likely decreasing the chances for successful school reentry and educational outcomes. In contrast, school personnel who attempt to empower justice-involved youth do so as independent agents acting outside of institutional authority. Because they oppose (or choose not to impose) secondary sanctions against justice-involved youth, they must act covertly at the margins of the institution as agents of empowerment.

***RQ2: How do justice-involved youth perceive their relationships with school personnel and peers?***

Research has identified the significance that positive relationships between students and teachers and students and peers have on school attendance, academic performance, and educational outcomes (Finn, 1989; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001; Payne, 2008). Research also has identified the importance teacher attitudes have on students' sense of belonging and attachment to school (Finn, 1989). Justice-involved youth reentering school arrive with a greater need for positive relationships and support systems but with a lesser likelihood of receiving these aids because of their stigmatized statuses arising from their juvenile justice system involvement (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989; Restivo & Lanier, 2015;

Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Stephanie, Trayvon, Marcus, and Henry each recalled significant effects that their juvenile-justice involvement had not only on established school-based relationships but also on potential relationships.

**Stephanie's Relationship Perceptions.** Stephanie anticipated that reentry to her former school might involve a few challenges, but the responses she encountered from school personnel upended her belief that they would give her the benefit of the doubt regarding her guilt or innocence. She had hoped that they would withhold judgment while her case worked its way through the juvenile justice system. Instead, she found that school personnel either withdrew from relationships with her or condemned her for a crime that had yet to be adjudicated. She said:

People look at you, regardless of what the situation is, without hearing your side of it. It's almost like you're guilty instantly. They believe clearly what the justice system is gonna say, whether I failed or not. They're gonna believe what they have to say. They don't really want an explanation. They didn't look for an explanation. You know, they would either be standoffish, or I was guilty before I even was guilty. And even after going through the programs and the classes and doing all the community service and complying with all of my court stuff and having that dismissal, it still didn't matter.

The treatment Stephanie received from school personnel who she had viewed as mentors and advocates left her shocked, confused, and hurt. She said: "It's like my whole world just came crumbling down. Instead of people wanting to uplift me, support me, and fight for me, they did completely the opposite." She had considered herself a committed student who had invested time and effort in building relationships with school personnel. She believed that she had failed their expectations, so their ostracization was the consequence she faced for her failure. She said:

I did a lot of extracurricular stuff, a lot of extra stuff to make sure I got where I was going. ...I was the good kid, the kid that went above and beyond to do what I needed to do to get where I wanted to go in life. So when [my arrest] happened, I think it kind of took everybody for a total turn that they didn't expect.

She also thought that school personnel believed their time and efforts had been wasted on her when they could have invested in other students who would not have engaged in unlawful behavior. Stephanie noted that an English teacher who had played an important role in her life remained invested in her but had opened distance between them after Stephanie's arrest and school reentry. Even though Stephanie's English teacher remained engaged with her, Stephanie felt a quiet judgment arising from her. She said:

I think she didn't really turn her back on me or disconnect. It was more or less...she was trying to understand it. You know, she was trying to put the pieces together. And with all of her heart, I know, to this day, she believes me, and I think now, she definitely does. But it's that questioning look in her eye, like she's sitting there trying to be positive and trying to be strong for me and trying to get me to turn the situation around and be motivating and teach me to be determined. But at the same time, you can see in the back of her mind that she's questioning.

For Stephanie, the negative reactions she received from school personnel and the stigma imposed on her still lingers over a decade after she graduated high school. When she returned to school, she expected that her years of work building her reputation as a conscientious, responsible student protected her from condemnation for her juvenile justice system involvement, but she found that to not be the case. She also believed that her adamant assertion of innocence struck

the wrong chord with school personnel who wanted her to demonstrate contrition and repentance for her unlawful behavior.

I guess they felt like they wanted a different reaction out of me. I think they took me as a person that always lived up to “First impressions are everything, your word is your bond, you always keep your promises, if you’re on time, you’re late,” like I was this picture-perfect person. When I looked at everybody and pretty much said, “Forget you. I don’t care what y’all think, or what y’all say, I’m not going to sit there and apologize for something that I’m not responsible for,” I think it just in their mind triggered something, and to this day, I’m not sure what that was.

Stephanie recalled that her status as a justice-involved youth had less effect on her relationships with her peers, but she noted that her arrest diminished her status among them.

**Trayvon’s Relationship Perceptions.** In contrast to Stephanie’s experiences with school personnel, Trayvon found significant support at the alternative school that he entered. He noted that school personnel knew of his involvement with the juvenile justice system and offered him support and encouragement instead of condemnation. He said their approach was: “Just positive reinforcement of ‘Don’t worry about your situation. You’re going to be okay. Just keep pressing forward.’” He believed that school personnel also recognized the complexities of his life outside of school and helped him not only succeed academically but also financially. He said:

My senior year at [alternative school], I have a half day schedule, and I’m working at the school. So I leave school at 12 and I clock in at 12:30 and I work the front desk from 12:30 to four at the school. Now during this time financially I’m not where I want to be. I’m living in an apartment with my children’s mother, and we have two young kids. So I went to the Director of the School, Mr. So-and-So, and I tell him my situation, basically

tell him look, “This is my senior year, I’m working for you, you’re paying me, it’s not enough.” I told him my situation. I needed clothes and all this. So what he did was he went out and bought me a whole wardrobe set. I swear, the director, he bought me 10 pairs of pants, 10 shirts and two pairs of shoes. . . . This school broke its neck to make sure whatever we needed, we got. I can honestly say that. Once I found out that this school was a helpful resource for any problems that I had, I told them, and they did whatever they could. Whatever.

He credited the financial support that he received from the school as a significant factor in his successful reentry and school completion.

Trayvon found most school personnel at the alternative school to be more engaged with students, and he believed that the welcome that they showed him when he arrived at the school had a significant effect on his reentry experience. He noted that school personnel also monitored his progress and reinforced his positive behavior. He said:

[School personnel] accepted my situation, but they wanted better for me. So when I came back, it was, “You got this. We can get this done. Okay, we believe in you, but you have to believe in you.” Basically [they were] just teaching me that I am somebody and I was worth something and I could do it as far as school. They were trying to reinforce not to focus too much on my negative choices, but focus on my positive choices, because that’s going to outweigh my bad. . . . My school really rallied around me trying to get back on a proper track coming from the secure facility. And they did a great job.

But he also recalled that not all teachers at the alternative school received him with patience and understanding. He noted that some school personnel used his status as a justice-involved youth to criticize his attitude or behavior, referring to him as a “jailbird,” in what he believed to be their

attempt to motivate him to move beyond his past experiences. He still found their comments to be hurtful.

When I would get them mad or if they would be frustrated or when I acted out, they would use my incarceration as a youth as a point of reference for my behavior. ...So actually, like, any child would do, I would spaz out. At the end, it wasn't well received. [They responded to me] as a jailbird, or I'm not gonna be nothing in life if I don't get my life together. They were basically trying to use scare tactics.

Trayvon believed that the alternative school's leadership influenced the approach that school personnel took to him and other justice-involved youth. He identified a school administrator who worked to build a relationship with him as an important factor in his successful school reentry and school completion. He said:

My high school principal really wanted the best for me and made sure that I had all the resources available to acquire it. ... [T]his principal actually cared. She cared for her job. She cared for the children that she supervised. And she wanted better for them. ...My first day in the school, she talked to us and said we are we are her children. She is our parent. The school adopted a family mentality. And, and I think that was key to the success of the students graduating as well as me, knowing that I had support that I can go to my principal and say, "Look, I'm not getting no food at home. Can you help me out? I need some new clothes. Can you help me out?" And she didn't hesitate to help us out in any of those areas.

Trayvon noted that his peers demonstrated more extreme reactions than school personnel to his status as a justice-involved youth. He recalled that some of his peers saw his arrest and incarceration as exciting and unique, which attracted them to him.

Some of them were [aware that I had been arrested], some weren't. They were a bit intrigued, believe it or not. They were interested. ...I guess being incarcerated as a youth didn't allow for a lot of people to be exposed to that. So, in essence, when I came with that experience, they were like more so intrigued than like anything. They were like, "Wow, you were locked up?"

Even though some peers seemed to be impressed with Trayvon's status as a justice-involved youth, others responded much more negatively to his status.

I was more embarrassed. ...I was embarrassed. I felt ashamed. I felt guilty. ... Just talked about me like, talked about the fact that I was a young incarceratee. Talked about the fact that I would probably be nothing in life because of my incarceration. Just hurtful things.

You know, kids can be real mean and hurtful.

Trayvon recalled that his peers who looked down on his status as a justice-involved youth avoided contact with the juvenile justice system themselves and seemed to be more successful in school.

**Marcus' Relationship Perceptions.** When Marcus returned to school, he and his parents disclosed his status as a justice-involved youth to school personnel; however, he did not recall that his status had an adverse effect on the reactions he received from school personnel. He returned to an in-school alternative education program that limited the contact that he and other students had with the larger school community, but he believed the alternative education program brought him into contact with school personnel who had more experience with justice-involved youth. He noted that he reentered the juvenile justice system only a few weeks after his school reentry, so he believed that his brief return to school foreclosed opportunities to develop relationships outside of the alternative education program. Marcus believed that had he remained

in high school, he would have developed closer relationships with more school personnel. He said:

I didn't really get a chance in high school to understand the bonding part of a teacher and myself one-on-one, you know, on a one-on-one standpoint. ...I'm quite sure I would have found someone, or they would have appointed someone, but not at that time. Not at that time. There was no one.

He had difficulty recalling specific interactions with most school personnel but identified positive interactions he had experienced with the two teachers who oversaw the alternative education program. He said:

I felt like they wanted to see me just get further ahead with my education. And at that time, I was fifteen, fourteen years old, my freshman year, I guess. They didn't make me feel like I was in middle school or a child anymore.

He appreciated the support of the alternative education program teachers, but he also recognized that he needed more support from the school and school personnel to achieve a successful school reentry. He had hoped that he would have been provided behavioral support to ensure that he made better choices and academic support to ensure that he remained engaged with learning. He said:

It seemed like I kept spiraling toward the left instead of staying straight, keeping the straight path, or focusing on my education issues, because of me not really understanding exactly what it was that I was being told or being taught. I felt kind of out of place in [high school] raising my hand to get the proper help that I needed or felt like, I had to have someone sitting beside me constantly every day to learn. But I needed it, and I feel I

could have had that. And that's the only different feeling I have toward returning back to [high school].

Marcus recalled that his peers in the alternative education program knew of his juvenile justice involvement because some of them had attended middle school with him. He also recalled that the program's small size encouraged the participants to help each other and share their social experiences. He said:

Some of them I knew from middle school, so it wasn't too much of a shock...but we pretty much all got along. ... And everyone knew everyone in the small class. You know, we did try to help each other out. ...If I needed help or anything I was able to receive help not only just from the teachers but from other students as well.

He also focused on avoiding negative interactions with administrators because of the encounter that led to his juvenile justice system involvement. He also viewed administrators as disciplinarians, not supporters. He said: "I really tried to stay out of those principal's office because I saw too many offices of principals coming up in my younger days."

Marcus reentered juvenile justice system supervision after a few weeks in the alternative education program that he attended. He transitioned from juvenile justice supervision to Job Corps, where he worked toward career-related certificates. He developed positive views toward program staff while he was enrolled. He said:

I felt positive towards a lot of adults there, the teachers of the trades, the counselors, the staff members that was there, the adults that was there in the program, because they had an age range of 16 to 24. So, you know, I was around a lot of adults at that time, and I was only 16 in Job Corps.

He identified some negative relationships with staff members tasked with ensuring his behavior complied with the program's expectations, especially when he was but he also noted positive relationships with his caseworker and the camp director. The Job Corps staff at the camp that Marcus attended also struck him as having a greater empathy for him as a Black adolescent. He said: "They was pretty down to earth. Most of the staff there were Black American, because of the area that it was in, in [city name redacted]. And they made sure that we had an opportunity to move forward and succeed."

**Henry's Relationship Perceptions.** Henry found it difficult to form relationships with school personnel at the alternative school that he attended. He noted that school personnel seemed unprepared for students who came to school carrying the emotional weight of the traumatic experiences that they often encountered in their lives outside of school. He said:

The children that were coming into the classroom were so unkept, so undisciplined, so violent that a lot of the teachers were more concerned with their safety than the learning of children. A lot of them were not equipped to deal with some of the things that we, as children, were dealing with outside of the classroom. Seeing the violence, seeing people get shot, get stabbed, the fighting, the lack of nourishment.

Henry had no specific memories about his relationships with alternative school personnel in class. He believed that they had no interest in his education or wellbeing, so he viewed them as only coming to school to collect a paycheck, not to teach students. He noted that he had one positive encounter with a substitute teacher who had been tasked with supervising the alternative school's detention program. He explained that he had been assigned detention for disruptive behavior in class, which he later viewed as a fortuitous occurrence that brought him into contact with an adult who seemed to have a sincere interest in him. He said:

I could remember an individual, an older gentleman, that spoke with me one day, and I say this, I remember him because it was few individuals in my life that actually saw me and he said, “Look, you have potential” and this came because I had been sent to the detention center at the alternative school. And I had to write, like 500 sentences saying that I would never do something. I remember my hands were cramping up. I remember it was a very painful experience. But afterwards, I gave the guy my paper, and he looked at my handwriting, because early on, my mother had taught me to write in cursive. And so he’s looking at my handwriting, he is like, “You have excellent handwriting.” He was talking to me about if I really applied myself, the world is unlimited, and I can take advantage of all the opportunities. That meant something. I’ll never forget that he told me, “You just have to make up your mind what you want to be. And be it.”

### ***RQ2 Conclusion***

Even though Stephanie, Trayvon, Marcus, and Henry noted the indifference or outright hostility that they encountered from school personnel and social services staff, they each recalled one or more school personnel who expressed an interest in their education or wellbeing. Stephanie identified an English teacher who seemed disappointed in her involvement with the juvenile justice system but still cared about her as a student. Trayvon praised a school administrator who devoted herself to the justice-involved youth at her school and created a receptive, nurturing environment. Marcus had limited contact with school personnel but believed the teachers in charge of the alternative education program that he had attended encouraged and supported him. Henry described school personnel as unqualified, uninterested, and uncaring in their approach to him and other vulnerable students who attended his alternative school, but he

recalled one teacher who praised his handwriting and told him that he could accomplish anything that he set his mind to.

***RQ3: How do justice-involved youth perceive their school engagement opportunities?***

While the relationships students build with school personnel serve as one of their strongest connections to the school community, students also form bonds through academic pursuits, athletic activities, and club and organization participation. Research indicates that these bonding opportunities improve academic outcomes and attendance, reduce disciplinary referrals, and create a more positive, supportive school climate (Finn, 1989; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Whitlock, 2006). Through formal and informal secondary sanctions that restrict participation in academic, athletic, and social programs and activities, justice-involved youth often lose opportunities to engage with their school community and create prosocial bonds (Lieberman, Kirk, & Kim, 2014; Dennison & Demuth, 2018).

**Stephanie's School Bonds.** After Stephanie returned to her public school, she faced multiple school-imposed secondary sanctions that severed her existing school bonds and restricted her prosocial engagement with the school community. She said:

I was taken off [the softball team]. We signed a contract at the beginning that stated that...we couldn't be in any trouble in school or out of school. So that's like no in- or out-of-school suspension, not any kind of, obviously, charges or any kind of trouble. It would jeopardize somebody else that wanted or could have the chance that was not misbehaving, I guess.

Stephanie not only lost her position on the softball team but also lost her position as a student aide working in the school office. Because Stephanie had been enrolled in the school's business finance program and had built a reputation for reliability and trustworthiness, she had been

selected to be an office aide, a role that she had found to be rewarding and fulfilling. She found being discharged from the office aide position to be a devastating experience. She said:

It's just heartbreaking...Because of the image that I had, the reputation that I had, like I said, I was the good girl. I was put together. I had my stuff where it needed to be. ...I felt very respected, and to have that change...It's just, it's shattering, like it's life altering in a way, in more ways than one.

Being stripped of the office aide position weakened Stephanie's engagement with the school community and further diminished her self-perception. She came to see it as another example of how the school community imposed an unnecessary, unwarranted secondary sanction on her for her actions outside of the school community itself.

**Trayvon's School Bonds.** Trayvon's experience with school bond formation stands in stark contrast to Stephanie's experience. The alternative school where Trayvon enrolled presented him with opportunities to build stronger bonds to the school community despite his status as a justice-involved youth. He joined the basketball team, and, with the encouragement of an administrator, who he recalls with great fondness and respect, he also competed with the debate team. He noted that the basketball coach set a high standard for player behavior, which he respected and strove to meet to ensure he retained his place on the team. He said:

I always had been talented in basketball. So my high school basketball coach really kind of defied the odds and allowed me to play because I was on a probationary period. So I just had to be extra, extra, extra, extra, extra good, which I did, because I really wanted to play basketball.

Trayvon gave significant praise to the alternative school administrator, who he believed looked beyond his status as a justice-involved youth to see his intellectual potential as a debate team

member. He credited his daily, after-school involvement with the debate team as an important source for his intellectual development as well as his school engagement. He said:

My principal forced me onto the debate team because she saw something in me that I didn't see. And then I wound up liking it. And so the debate team, we would meet every day after school for 45 minutes. And we would have a structural debate like once every two weeks, based on a topic that the school picked from a survey. We had to either pick a side, pro or con. Those experiences, I would say, were like, very impactful in my cognitive development as an adolescent.

Trayvon said he also found connection through his classes, which incorporated culturally relevant curriculum that centered experiences and learning that mattered to him. He also saw culturally relevant curriculum as a path to relationships with his teachers, who he identified as predominantly White, through open discussions about the different cultural experiences that the teachers and students brought to the classroom. The academic engagement he found in a curriculum that connected to his life experiences gave him a greater sense of belonging in the school community. He said:

They gave me an important sense of self. ...they gave me an important sense of self, so [alternative school]...It was a private school. Our curriculum was based on Afrocentric learning. So we had the curriculum that [metropolitan city] public schools had, but we also had extra classes, like African American Studies, African American history. ...The base of our education was taught on Africa, our roots, our ancestors, because most of our school was predominately Black, 95% Black. But we had a lot of white teachers. And that was the best thing about it because we were able to reciprocate experiences. We were able to cherish experiences from our teachers' lives and from our lives.

Trayvon viewed basketball, debate club, and academic engagement as connections to the alternative school as an institution and as a community. He also believed his greater school engagement discouraged his interest in unlawful behavior. He said:

At that point in time, all my time, I had a lot of idle time, and my idle time was the main reason of me getting into a lot of trouble. So I guess filling those gaps with activities that were positive was the best way for me not to be involved in the things that I were that would lead me back to the situation that I was in.

**Marcus' School Bonds.** Extended periods of juvenile justice system supervision in residential facilities after eighth grade limited Marcus' opportunities to connect to school. He noted that his juvenile justice system involvement occurred during his transition from middle school to high school, and he believed the disruption that he experienced affected his perception of himself and his relationships with others. Restrictions placed on students in the alternative education program that Marcus attended also prevented him from pursuing school engagement opportunities.

In middle school, Marcus became involved in the school community as a member of the wrestling team, and while he had been interested in basketball, he noted that he had lacked the skills to make the team. Marcus recalled one opportunity he had to participate in the greater school community that hosted his alternative education program. He described a brief encounter with a baseball coach who had spotted him playing softball during physical education class and had approached him about trying out for the team. Marcus said:

We was playing softball. ...I was playing third base, and [the baseball coach] saw my arm, how I threw. I scooped the ball up on a base hit and threw the ball to first base to get the runner out. So he was like, "Oh, man, you should come out and play baseball on the

baseball team.” I gave that some thought. ... I didn’t even have a chance to actually go down and talk to the coach because a week after that I was back to incarceration. I was gone for pretty much the rest of the school year.

His brief return to public school offered him an opportunity to connect with the school community through the baseball team, but he never had the chance to follow up on it. Over 20 years after the brief encounter he had with a baseball coach during a physical education class, Marcus recalled the conversation and the possibilities it offered for him.

**Henry’s School Bonds.** Henry had no connections to the alternative school he attended. He recalled that the alternative school had no clubs, no sports teams, and no school community. He said:

You just went and you sat. Right? No recreation. They had a recess period, as they called it, and I thought that expired in elementary school. If you were on a recess period, you just go and you get your lunch, you hang out for a moment, talk to a couple of people, and then you return back to the classroom.

Henry described an environment in which students and school personnel rarely interacted in school and not at all in the communities that the school served. He said:

I was 13-14 years old. And there was no system of accountability when it came to demanding that I learn, no system whatsoever, not from me, not from the instructors, not from the alternative public educational environment, meaning contacting families, or my group home, and informing my counselor that there’s a report. And within this analysis, I’m weak in this area, I’m strong in this area. There was no PTA meetings. It was just...I don’t know if you’ve ever seen one of them movies like *Lean on Me*, or where you have

a radical principal that comes in and wants to clean up the environment. Well, it was one of those environments, minus the radical principal.

The only purpose that school served for Henry was as a relatively safe place away from the dangers that he faced in his community. He said:

It was a place to get off the streets. And for me to escape a potential beating, stabbing, or shooting because I was in a gang-infested environment, and I was considered to be a rival. ...So going into the school I felt this sense of connection in being safe. ...way back then they had the resource officers. They were just police, but they called them something else. And so gang members never really came unless they were, you know, going to school there in that environment. So they never really came so it was kind of safe. You could get off the bus stop, get inside of the school gate, go through the little metal detectors. You know no one else is bringing guns and stuff in there, so you were safe.

### ***RQ3 Conclusion***

Stephanie, Marcus, and Henry noted that they either lost school bonds or had no opportunities to create school bonds after their school reentries. In contrast, Trayvon encountered multiple opportunities and encouragement to create school bonds with his alternative school community.

Stephanie underwent severance of existing school bonds through removal from a rewarding academic program, expulsion from the softball team, and elimination from a student aide position, all of which had given her a sense of pride, accomplishment, and trust. Losing these positions further isolated her from the school community. In Trayvon's school reentry, he encountered adults who worked to build his bonds to the school community through the efforts they made to place him on the school debate team and recruit him for the basketball team. He

also earned a position of trust, respect, responsibility, and income through his position as a paid school office aide. Marcus experienced so many different educational environments during his youth that he never seemed to stay in one school long enough to pursue opportunities to establish bonds to the school community through social, athletic, or extracurricular activities; however, he vividly recalled a nameless coach complimenting his athletic skill and asking him to try out for the school baseball team. Thus, the opportunity mattered to Marcus even if he never fully realized it. Henry recalled no opportunities through clubs or sports to build bonds with the school community.

### **Theme Three: School Personnel as Gatekeepers to Educational Benefits**

The third theme that emerged from the findings was the control that school personnel exerted over educational benefits that were seemingly inequitably and arbitrarily granted or denied to students. Study participants believed that school personnel acted as powerful gatekeepers who imposed secondary sanctions on justice-involved youth and other vulnerable students by withholding educational benefits that were granted to their peers.

After Stephanie reentered her public school as a justice-involved youth, school personnel withdrew the educational benefits that they had granted her prior to her juvenile justice system involvement. For example, she lost access to an internship program that she could have exchanged for future access to economic capital. Marcus noted that he was able to bypass the gatekeepers who barred justice-involved youth from enrolling in Job Corps because a sympathetic judge had removed the stigmatizing label attached to him. Henry entered an alternative school that he described as so bereft of resources that no educational benefits existed for school personnel to grant or deny. Because Henry believed that school personnel had no educational benefits to grant or deny, he abandoned school to engage in criminal acts, a choice

that he believed offered more immediate benefits than he would have received in school.

Trayvon also entered an alternative school, but he encountered school personnel who granted him academic, extracurricular, social, and economic benefits that he had not expected to receive as a justice-involved youth.

School personnel's role as institutional agents tasked with gatekeeping functions complement their role as institutional agents tasked with enforcement functions. While these roles seem to overlap in many ways, they differ on one essential point – autonomy. As enforcement agents, school personnel have limited autonomy to oppose the exclusionary policies and practices that schools require them to enforce against justice-involved youth. As gatekeeping agents, school personnel have more autonomy to grant access to educational benefits that schools allow them to share with students. Study participants' different experiences illustrate the decision-making autonomy that school personnel have to determine which students receive access to the limited educational benefits that schools control.

***RQ4: How do justice-involved youth perceive their access to educational benefits?***

Schools and school personnel grant or deny access to formal and informal educational benefits derived from participation in school academic, extracurricular, and social spheres. Through the control that schools and school personnel exert over access to educational benefits, they ordain students' existing social, economic, and cultural capitals and determine access to future capitals. Stephanie, Marcus, and Henry recognized that their schools and school personnel exerted significant control over their access to academic, extracurricular, and social spheres in school. They believed the labels that school personnel attached to them, the relationships and bonds that they withheld from them, and the opportunities that they denied to them restricted their access to educational benefits embodied in school academic, extracurricular, and social

successes. In contrast, Trayvon noted that school personnel at his alternative school supported his school reentry, encouraged his school community engagement, and facilitated his pursuit of academic, extracurricular, and social successes.

**Stephanie's Access to School-Based Capitals.** Stephanie said that her status as a justice-involved youth triggered formal and informal secondary sanctions that stripped her of the educational benefits that she had formerly enjoyed as an engaged, successful student who was involved in academic, extracurricular, and social activities and had strong support from school personnel. She recalled that school personnel excluded her from academic programs, extracurricular activities, and social spaces after she returned to school as a justice-involved youth. School personnel also expelled her from an internship program that she had believed would help her pursue a criminal justice degree and a law enforcement career. She said:

I went from having all of that to having nothing. ...I had amazing grades. My GPA was through the roof. I had all of these opportunities to have internships, colleges, like I had my pick of the world I feel like at that point. ...I think it was even worse, because of who I was. That's like seeing a celebrity get arrested for a murder, like nobody would have suspected me to be that person. And then when it happens, they just completely did a turn and went in the opposite direction with me, and it was wrong.

Stephanie described the internship program as a limited commodity for which students competed, so she believed that her admission to the program enhanced her reputation, generated more educational benefits, and expanded her post-secondary school and career options. Being expelled from the internship program served as a significant secondary sanction for her, depriving her of ordination for existing social, economic, and cultural capitals and denying her access to future capitals. She said:

It's disappointing. I think especially it was more so disappointing because I wasn't guilty of what they said I was. And I think that was the heartbreaking thing because...it changed directions for my life, period. I was planning to be a criminal justice major, psychology minor. I was getting ready to have my internship. I'd actually started the process in my internship and lost all of that...

She believed that the formal and informal secondary sanctions imposed on her had no logical relationship to her involvement with the juvenile justice system and served only to enhance her immediate punishment and restrict her future academic and career opportunities. She said that she learned that formal and informal secondary sanctions such as requirements to disclose criminal convictions on job and college applications follow individuals who have contact with juvenile or adult justice systems. She also noted that her involvement with the juvenile and adult justice systems came to define almost every aspect of her life and relationships. She said:

It's hard. People look at you different. They treat you different. A lot of opportunities aren't the same. Once you have charges on your record, jobs, certain classes, certain program, it strikes you out of a lot of things. Even when you have a dismissal on your record, it still shows up on your record. It just says dismissed, so they can still see it and judge you based off of what they see on that paper, not knowing what you know, what might have happened, or what the case was.

Stephanie believed that her status as a justice-involved youth resulted in school personnel imposing secondary sanctions on her which devalued her accumulated, ordained social, economic, and cultural capitals and deprived her of access to future capitals. She also described the persistent effect secondary sanctions had on her after she graduated, as they continued

denying her opportunities to accumulate capitals through post-secondary education, student loan programs, and job applications.

**Marcus' Access to School-Based Capitals.** Marcus lost access to educational benefits after he violated his probation and reentered the juvenile justice system, but a sympathetic judge gave Marcus a second chance to acquire educational and vocational benefits through Job Corps. The judge modified Marcus' sentencing paperwork to remove information that would have disqualified him from participating in the program. He said: "And that was part of the deal. The judge said, he got to make it seem as though I wasn't on any type of probation so that I can get into the program." Because Marcus enrolled in Job Corps free of the justice-involved youth stigma, he had an opportunity to create positive relationships and acquire career-related skills without facing barriers typically imposed on justice-involved youth. While reflecting on his Job Corps experience, he described his failure to complete all the educational and vocational programs available to him as a squandered opportunity to pursue future social, economic, and cultural capitals. He said:

If I was to give you the best explanation on how my experience was at Job Corps, I would have to say, had I not resigned, I probably would have been so far ahead in life today. ...It was a great experience. You had another opportunity to advance in life with trades. They made sure once you graduated and you left the campus or whatever, you didn't leave without a job. They would help find an apartment and pay for me to go to college if I had stayed longer. They gave you income for every trade that you completed. Just for signing up you got an additional \$500.

Marcus recognized that he had been given opportunities to pursue educational and vocational benefits after he was labeled a justice-involved youth, and he believed that he should have made better choices to act on the opportunities he had been given.

**Henry's Access to School-Based Capitals.** Henry recalled that the alternative school that he attended offered no educational benefits to students and presented no opportunities for them to ordain their existing social, economic, and cultural capitals or pursue future capitals. He eventually left school to pursue opportunities to ordain and acquire capitals on the street, which he believed made practical sense because he saw no opportunities arising from attending school. He said:

I just figured [school] was a waste of time...instead of doing [school], we could go steal a couple of bikes, we could sell these bikes, we could then invest in drug-related activity, and we could make money in that manner. And so that was the goal. Just to leave school and go to one of these rich neighborhoods, steal a couple of dirt bikes, take it back to some dealers, trade the stolen merchandise for some drugs, and then sell it, you know, the drugs. on the corner, and then take the money and just continue to invest in that product.

Henry recognized that schools serve as a means of class reproduction, ordaining capitals that the dominant class values and controlling access to future capitals through school personnel who enforce formal and informal policies and practices that facilitate and hinder capital ordination and access. He knew that the alternative school that he attended neither ordained existing capitals nor provided opportunities to pursue future capitals, so he abandoned school to pursue what he believed to be more lucrative opportunities outside of recognized social institutions.

**Trayvon's Access to School-Based Capitals.** Trayvon noted that attending an alternative school for justice-involved youth helped him understand the role schools play in

conferring educational benefits; ordaining existing social, economic, and cultural capitals; and facilitating access to future capitals. He noted that his alternative school's reputation and community connections gave him and other students access to opportunities that they might not have obtained through public schools. Trayvon described how the school's community connections helped him pursue social, economic, and cultural capitals during his reentry and after he graduated. He said:

I got a job from mentioning my school to someone that my hiring manager knew at the school. The hiring manager had a family member that went to the school that I didn't know, and the hiring manager hired me based on the fact that I went to that school.

School personnel, especially the assistant principal who made such a significant positive impression on Trayvon, also conferred educational benefits to him through the relationships they shared with him. He expanded his access to educational benefits through involvement in academic and extracurricular activities, which school personnel encouraged. He said:

I played high school ball for four years, and I had played middle school basketball. That was pretty nice. If I went to college, I'm pretty sure I would have been playing in college. And I was also the captain of our debate team in high school.

Trayvon believed that his alternative school and school personnel also helped him prepare for careers after high school. He noted that school personnel helped him develop a better work ethic by employing him to work in the school office. In contrast to Stephanie, whose school stripped her of her position as an aide in the school office, Trayvon gained an aide position that paid him to develop the skills he believed he needed for a successful life after high school. He said:

Let me tell you why it makes so much sense: Because when you graduate college and you start working, you have to go to work to get paid. So it's basically setting you up to learn

how to go somewhere for eight hours and get paid for doing a good job. And actually my school ingrained into me my work ethic. They ingrained into me to go somewhere for X amount of hours for a week, and at the end of that week, you'll get rewarded with money. That's what happens in life. You go to work, you do a good job, and at the end of your work week, you get paid. ...So I thank that school for ingraining that into us.

Trayvon later learned that his alternative school had lacked accreditation when he attended it, and he believed that the school's lack of accreditation reduced his high school diploma's value. Despite the accreditation issue, he believed the alternative school's community reputation and connections translated into concrete educational benefits that he could be converted to social, economic, and cultural capitals with recognized values.

#### ***RQ4 Conclusion***

Study participants recognized that schools and school personnel controlled access to educational benefits, granted access to students who held valued capitals and honored statuses, and rescinded or denied access to students who held devalued capitals and dishonored statuses. Stephanie believed that control and ownership of ordained economic and social capitals affects educational outcomes for justice-involved youth and her loss of ordained capitals as a member of this dishonored class limited her educational attainment. She suggested that justice-involved youth who possessed superior or surplus ordained capitals received milder sanctions while youth who possessed inferior or limited capitals faced severer sanctions. She said:

I've learned that in those situations, money buys you freedom. Social, political things buy you freedom. Who your parents are attached to, who you're attached to, and that's not fair. Everybody should have the same opportunities, the same decisions, the same rights, the same punishment, and it's not like that. Sadly, it's designed flawed, and there's really

no way to perfect it. But there's changes that can be made, and for them to be willing to kind of acknowledge that, and then, in a sense dangle it in my face like, "Okay, we're going to give you a taste of what you want in life, but we're not going to give it to you all the way."

Stephanie regretted the lost access to educational benefits and later, as an adult, access to future capitals that her encounters with the legal system caused. She described her involvement with the juvenile justice system and the events that followed as the departure point for her life course, setting the stage for her choices and their outcomes in the years that followed.

When Marcus reentered school, he was placed in a specialty program that isolated him from the school community. The few weeks he attended the specialty program left him with no opportunity to fully access education resources. He acknowledged that the Job Corps training program which he attended had given him access to education resources through relationships and career-related skills, but he believed that he had squandered the opportunities the program had offered him.

The school that Henry reentered provided limited access to education resources and opportunities for him to obtain future capitals. Because Henry lacked ordained capitals that the school and school personnel valued, he believed that he received no tangible benefits from the limited education resources available to him. He said that school gave him little more than an escape from the streets for a few hours each day. He found more value in the practical education that he acquired stealing to raise money to invest in drugs to sell and reinvesting profits from drug sales to expand his market. He realized as an adult that his unlawful activities as an adolescent had provided him an education similar to what he would have learned in a more formal setting. He said:

From that experience, when I went to college, or, should I say, vocational certification courses, small business management and entrepreneurship, I realized that I was a hell of a businessman. And I didn't even know it. Because, naturally, I understood the process, I understood the product, and I understood the people. And no one ever really taught me that. If I had been in a classroom with a teacher that understood, you know, my issue, and had explained to me that some of the things that I was out doing on the corner that, whereas I should have been in the classroom, that someone had explained to me that this is the same thing that individuals like Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, you know, Bobby Johnson, all these other billionaires are basically doing, who knows what I could have been?

For Trayvon, the alternative school that he reentered allowed him to access education resources, but the alternative school existed in a "shadow field" that had limited ability to confer capitals that would be recognized outside of the immediate school community.

Marcus, Henry, and Trayvon noted that they had little or no family social, cultural, and economic capitals on which to draw to negotiate their school reentries and ensure their access to educational benefits. They identified multiple factors such as juvenile justice system involvement, foster care placement, food and housing insecurity, and family situations that reduced their personal and family capitals. They seemed unsurprised that schools and school personnel denied justice-involved youth educational benefits that other students enjoyed.

In contrast, Stephanie noted that her family possessed significant social, economic, and cultural capital, which she believed would protect her reputation and insulate her from loss of educational benefits. She discovered that the capitals embodied in her reputation and her family's economic success and social connections failed to mitigate the stigma attached to her as a

justice-involved youth. She still experienced significant secondary sanctions imposed on her by school personnel enforcing formal and informal school policies and practices. Unlike other study participants, Stephanie believed she had been betrayed by school personnel who imposed secondary sanctions on her that stripped her of the educational benefits that she had enjoyed prior to her juvenile justice system contact.

Stephanie, Trayvon, and Marcus all identified the important role high school plays in creating access to current and future social, cultural, and economic capitals. The indifference, hostility, and secondary sanctions Stephanie faced when she reentered school directly affected her access to current and future capitals, for she lost her position in an academic program, an internship position, and her college acceptance, all of which deprived her of opportunities to accumulate future social, cultural, and economic capitals. Marcus chose to pursue the immediate and future capitals the Job Corps program offered to its participants, but he chose to abandon the program before completing all the certificates available to him. His decision to leave the program also cost him future education, housing, military service, and employment opportunities, and he later came to regret walking away from the opportunities his continued participation in Job Corps would have brought to him. In contrast, Trayvon's alternative school personnel gave him immediate opportunities to participate in educational benefits by participating in an extracurricular activity and sport. He also obtained access to economic capital as a paid student aide and later activated the social capital he had acquired through the alternative school to obtain post-graduation employment through an employer who had community and family connections to Trayvon's alternative school and recognized its reputation in the community.

## Conclusion

The study findings indicate that study participants' school reentry experiences were affected by their stigmatized statuses, diminished bonding and relationship formation opportunities, and reduced access to educational benefits.

First, study participants identified status changes associated with their juvenile justice system involvement. Three study participants believed that the stigma inherent to their statuses as justice-involved youth lowered their esteem in the eyes of school personnel and peers. One study participant recalled that he received more support from school personnel at the alternative school he attended; however, he also noted that some school personnel still responded to him negatively because he believed that they perceived him as having a lower status.

Second, study participants believed that they had few or no opportunities to forge bonds to the school community and school personnel. Three study participants believed that they had few opportunities to form school bonds and relationships because of their stigmatized statuses as justice-involved youth, and they responded with feelings of isolation and alienation. Once again, one study participant who attended an alternative school experienced a different reception, noting that he encountered school personnel who encouraged him to play a sport, join a club, and work in the school front office.

Third, study participants believed that they were denied full educational benefits because of their stigmatized statuses and weak or nonexistent school bonds. Three study participants recalled that school personnel enforced formal and informal rules against them that denied ordination of their existing social, economic, and cultural capitals and their access to educational benefits. In contrast, the study participant who attend an alternative school recalled unexpected opportunities to increase his existing social, economic, and cultural capitals and pursue future

capitals after he graduated, though the value of future capital derived from the alternative school seemed to only have transferability within the alternative school itself and among individuals who had associations with the alternative school.

### **Exclusionary Policies and Practices**

School reentry proved difficult or impossible for study participants. For three study participants, school reentry brought them into contact with formal and informal exclusionary school policies and practices enforced by school personnel acting as institutional agents. They believed that school personnel treated them as stigmatized outcasts, hindered their school bonds and relationships, and denied them educational benefits enjoyed by their non-stigmatized peers. The formal and informal exclusionary school policies and practices that school personnel as institutional agents enforced against them ultimately decreased their perception of school as a beneficial institution and school personnel as trusted adults. In contrast, one study participant found a welcome, supportive environment at the alternative school that he entered, but it must be noted that he reentered an alternative school that had been established to work with justice-involved youth and other vulnerable populations.

### **Emergent Themes Revisited**

The data, study findings, and research questions point to three emergent themes that characterize the school reentry experiences of justice involved youth. First, school reentry is a life-altering event with lifelong effects. Second, institutional and human barriers hinder school reentry and integration/reintegration into school communities. Third, school personnel serve as gatekeepers who control access to educational benefits.

Study participants recalled school reentry as emotionally challenging experiences that affected their immediate and long-term life courses. Three study participants recalled feeling

anger, frustration, sorrow, loss, and indifference during their school reentry experience, and only one of the three remained in school and received her high school diploma. One study participant recalled feeling appreciated, respected, and supported, and he fully engaged in the school community and eventually graduated. These findings suggest that justice-involved youth likely do not receive the social and emotional support that they need to smoothly reenter public and alternative schools and achieve successful educational outcomes.

Study participants also encountered different institutional and human barriers to their school reentry. Three study participants described inflexible exclusionary school policies and practices enforced by indifferent or openly hostile school personnel. They believed that schools and school personnel either intentionally erected barriers to discourage their school reentries or simply responded with indifference to their social, emotional, and educational needs. One study participant encountered institutional barriers at the school division level that channeled him to an alternative school, but the alternative school and school personnel created pathways to support his reentry, not barriers to discourage it. These findings suggest that school reentry happens at the local level, with schools and school personnel capable of discouraging or encouraging school reentry through policies and practices and school personnel actions.

Study participants characterized school personnel as powerful gatekeepers who controlled access educational benefits obtained through academic, extracurricular, and social opportunities. Three study participants recalled that school personnel engaged in inequitable allocation of educational benefits by granting access to favored groups and denying access to disfavored groups. One study participant made similar observations about the control that school personnel exerted over access to educational benefits, but unlike other study participants, he described school personnel as empowering him to pursue educational benefits through academic,

extracurricular, and social activities. These findings suggest that school personnel have significant autonomy in controlling the educational benefits available to justice-involved youth; however, school personnel also have unchecked power in distributing access to educational benefits, which might lead to inequitable and unethical allocation of educational benefits among favored and disfavored groups.

The following chapter will expand on this chapter's findings through a discussion of theoretical implications, practice implications, recommendations, and limitations.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter presented study participants' school reentry experiences within the context of this study's research questions examining the school reentry experiences of justice involved youth through a theoretical framework derived from labeling, social control, and field theories. The data that study participants provided and the findings derived from that data suggest the existence of three interrelated themes: 1). School reentry is a life-altering event with lifelong effects; 2). Institutional and human barriers hinder reentry and integration/reintegration; and 3). School personnel serve as gatekeepers to educational benefits. The data, findings, and emergent themes support the concept of school exclusion theory as an emergent theoretical framework to describe school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth as situated within formal and informal school-sanctioned processes resulting in alienation from the school community, restrictions on school bond and relationship formation, and limitations on access to educational benefits that provide sanctioned mechanisms for ordination of existing capitals and pathways to future capitals.

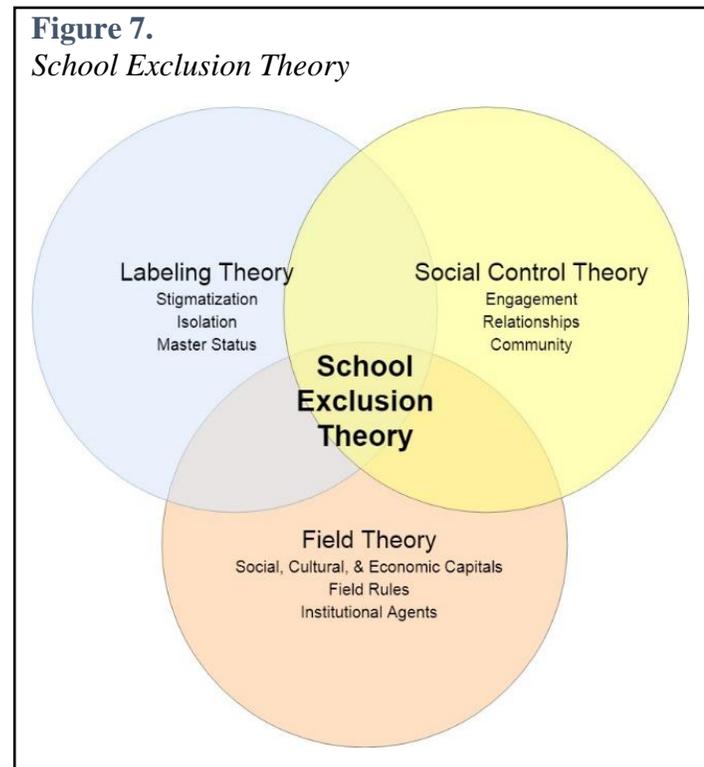
This chapter discusses this study's theoretical and practice implications, presents recommendations, and describes study limitations.

### **Theoretical Implications**

During my review of the school and community reentry literature for possible theoretical frameworks to guide my research, I struggled to identify a standalone theoretical framework that described the complexity of the school reentry process faced by justice-involved youth. I noted that school reentry research literature tended to focus on characteristics of the justice-involved youth undergoing school reentry or on factors arising from their personal and family

demographics, communities, and life courses. I also observed that theoretical frameworks in the research literature ignored the synergistic effects that school personnel and formal and informal institutional policies and practices had on the school reentry phenomenon and educational outcomes for justice-involved youth. I found broad guidance in theoretical frameworks arising from critical theory and critical race theory, but research literature relying on these theoretical frameworks had only secondary or tertiary relationships to this study's purpose, research questions, study population, and methodology.

I ultimately narrowed this study's theoretical framework possibilities to labeling, social control, and field theories, but each theory, taken in isolation, gave only narrow insight into a limited aspect of the school reentry phenomenon. I realized that



these three theories in combination provided a more comprehensive explanation of the exclusionary process that justice-involved youth appear to encounter when they reenter schools. The process seemed to incorporate the actions and inactions of school personnel as institutional agents enforcing formal and informal policies and practices that diminish the statuses of justice-involved youth (labeling theory), deny them connections to the school community (social control theory), and rob them of the school-based social, economic, and cultural capitals bestowed as educational benefits on their peers (field theory). The combination of these theoretical

frameworks form a more robust theoretical framework that I have tentatively identified as school exclusion theory (Figure 3). The findings from this study examining the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth lend support to school exclusion theory as a viable theoretical framework for examination of the relationships among schools as social fields classifying students into rigid, hierarchical categories; school personnel as institutional agents enforcing inequitable formal and informal field rules; and vulnerable, marginalized students suffering exclusion, isolation, and alienation. The sections that follow situate this study's findings within labeling, social control, and field theories as components of school exclusion theory. While school exclusion theory seems to capture the synergistic effects occurring among the three contributing theories and describes the school reentry process faced by justice-involved youth, more research using this theoretical framework will be necessary to further test its premise and application.

### **Field Theory**

Justice-involved youth often begin their educations with limited ordained social, cultural, and economic capital. The stigmatized statuses that they acquire and school bond formation opportunities that they lose further reduce their ability to achieve ordination of their existing capitals or pursue opportunities for acquisition of future capitals. Because capital ordination and acquisition occur in schools through academic achievements and educational attainment (cultural capital); relationships with school personnel and peers (social capital); and post-secondary educational and vocational opportunities (economic capital) (Bourdieu, 1986), stigmatization, isolation, and alienation deprive justice-involved youth of the crucial educational benefits that schools provide students.

Fields such as education rely on formal and informal rules that ordain and value capitals, determine exchange rates among capitals, and define relationships and hierarchies among and between field members (Bourdieu, 1986; Barrett & Martina, 2012; Scott, 2012). Because field rules are not self-enforcing, fields rely on institutional agents for rule enforcement (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In schools, school personnel serve as institutional agents who enforce formal and informal school policies and practices, evaluate student academic performance and behavior, and control access to educational benefits, all of which create the possibility of secondary sanctioning of justice-involved youth not for specific violations of the field rules but for their dishonored statuses as members of a stigmatized underclass barred from full participation in the field.

Stephanie, Marcus, and Henry encountered school personnel as institutional agents who enforced field rules against them, leading to secondary sanctions that limited their participation in the school field and restricted their access to education resources. For example, Stephanie lost her position in an advanced academic program and an internship opportunity, and faced rescission of her university acceptance, all of which denied her access to educational benefits. Marcus accepted enrollment into Job Corps to avoid further juvenile justice sanctions, but in doing so, he excluded himself from access to recognized educational benefits available to students attending public schools. The schools that Henry recalled attending before and after his juvenile justice system contact provided no educational benefits and no access to future academic or vocational opportunities. In contrast to other study participants, Trayvon entered a “shadow field” – a field that lacked recognition from and relationships with other social fields – that allowed him to obtain educational benefits but only accumulate cultural, social, and economic capitals of indeterminate value. The alternative school’s lack of accreditation and mission as an alternative school for justice-involved youth diminished its status in relation to

other fields, which limited Trayvon's ability to exchange capitals that were ordained and acquired there.

### **Labeling Theory**

Labeling theory describes the process through which society attaches stigmatizing labels to individuals viewed as engaging in delinquent, deviant, or criminal behavior (Bernburg, 2009). Stigmatizing labels shape justice-involved youths' master statuses and influence not only their self-perceptions but also the perceptions of school personnel and social services staff who often play influential roles in their lives (Paternoster & Iovanni, 1989).

Stephanie, Trayvon, Marcus, and Henry recalled that their statuses as justice-involved youth became a significant part of their adolescent identities and affected their relationships with school personnel and peers, interfered with school academic and extracurricular opportunities, and, ultimately, limited their access to social, economic, and cultural capitals embodied in educational benefits. They recalled that they had been *overtly* assigned stigmatizing labels such as "thug" and "fuckup," or they assumed that they had been *covertly* assigned stigmatizing labels. They inferred assignment of such labels from the treatment that they received from school personnel. The stigmatizing labels used to describe study participants – often openly and directly – evoked defiant reactions, resulting in study participants adopting the characteristics associated with the labels they received and, ironically, affirming school personnel assumptions about them.

Stephanie said school personnel and peers judged her based solely on her arrest and adjudication, and the condemnation that she believed she received from school personnel remolded her self-perception and drove her to adopt more defiant behaviors. She believed that the judgment she received is a common outcome for justice-involved youth, because school personnel and peers make assumptions about the reasons underlying their unlawful behavior. She

said her entanglement with the juvenile justice system and later in the adult criminal justice system helped her understand how stigmatizing labels serve as a social shorthand to guide society's interactions with individuals sanctioned and labeled for their unlawful offenses. She believed that school personnel impose stigmatizing labels on justice-involved youth because the labels provide society a set of simplified expectations and social instructions relating to the labeled individual, which reduces the need to put effort into understanding the factors affecting the justice-involved youth's decisions to engage in unlawful behavior. For Stephanie, who attended a predominantly White high school that served an affluent, suburban community outside of a large mid-Atlantic city, her label as a justice-involved youth negatively affected her relationships with school personnel who she said had been her supporters and advocates before she encountered the juvenile justice system. Stephanie believed the label that school personnel imposed on her and the treatment that she received from them had a lasting, damaging effect on her self-perception, which she believed contributed to the decisions that led to her involvement with the adult criminal justice system.

Despite Trayvon's overall positive perception of school reentry at the alternative school that he attended after his involvement with the juvenile justice system, he recognized how labels affected not only the perception others had of him but also his self-perception. He also described the difficulty involved in building an identity with competing social forces and influential groups pushing him to assume roles that they expected of him but that he believed poorly fit him. He often saw himself as one identity – the “smart kid” – but knew he could achieve greater peer acceptance through another identity – the “cool kid” – who hid his intellectual ability so he could pursue peer approval. Trayvon recalled how his status as a justice-involved youth resulted in social services staff and some school personnel describing him as a “fuckup” – a label that

became his identify in his eyes and the eyes of adults whose professional roles gave them significant power over his life course. He also believed that the label that they gave him affected his school attendance options, leading to his exclusion from public school and enrollment in an alternative school. Even though Trayvon received support and encouragement from most school personnel at the alternative school that he attended, the label he believed that he had received affected his self-perceived identity and cast a shadow over his school reentry experience.

Marcus experienced a more subtle labeling process than other study participants. His early juvenile justice system involvement, isolation from school while awaiting adjudication, and long-term placement in a secure facility before reentering an alternative education program for vulnerable youth in high school late in his freshman year all contributed to the master status he assumed. Marcus also underwent significant and repeated disruptions to his education during a period in his life when changes to education statuses typically occur – the transition from middle school to high school. His placement in a program for vulnerable youth isolated him from the school community, resulting in a “softer” reentry than what was experienced by other study participants, but it still prevented him from engaging with the school community beyond the program he attended. Marcus pursued self-isolation, adopting a status as a “loner” who kept his distance from others, first in secure facilities and later in the alternative education program in high school. He eventually shed his stigma as a justice-involved youth through the efforts of a court judge who removed his label so he would not be barred from joining Job Corps. Marcus noted that Job Corps personnel had no knowledge of his involvement with the juvenile justice system, which he said would have not only prevented his participation in the program but also would have resulted in his expulsion had program administrators learned of his former status. He

believed that entering Job Corps without a stigmatizing label prevented program staff from prejudging him based on negative characteristics associated with justice-involved youth.

Henry reentered an alternative school where all students collectively received stigmatizing labels because of their involvement with the juvenile justice system, social services, foster care, or other agencies that associated them with vulnerable, marginalized groups. With the exception of one teacher who Henry recalled as supportive and encouraging, he believed school personnel expressed indifference and hostility toward all students. Henry described school personnel at the alternative school as unprepared to teach students and indifferent to their social and emotional needs. He believed that school personnel assigned him and his peers labels such as gang members, criminals, and difficult students, among other negative classifications, to absolve themselves of their failure to address students' poor academic progress, attendance, and behavior. Henry believed that the label school personnel assigned to him categorized him as being unworthy of education because of his juvenile justice system involvement and gang association. For Henry, his label also became the lens through which he saw himself and contributed to his repeated involvement with the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems.

### **Social Control Theory**

Social control theory describes how youth form school bonds through relationships with school personnel and participation in school activities strengthen student engagement with their school communities (Hirschi, 1969). School-based bonds arise from attachment to school, attachment to school personnel, school commitment, and school involvement (Maddox and Prinz, 2003). Social control theory has examined school bonds through conceptualizations such as school attachment, school bonding, school climate, school involvement, student satisfaction, positive orientation toward school, and teacher support (Whitlock, 2006). Blum and Libbey

(2004) described three conditions that contribute to environments conducive to school bond formation: high expectations for academic success, perceived school support, and safe school environments. Maddox and Prinz (2003) noted that environment and individual experiences contribute or detract from school bond formation. Finn (1989) argued that schools and school personnel reject youth whose grades or behavior fall below expectations, which further alienates them from the school community and contributes to their decisions to abandon school. Research indicates that school bonds created through athletic, academic, and social activities further integrate youth into the school community and serve as reinforcement for their commitment to educational attainment and desistance from unlawful behavior (Dornbusch, Erickson, Laird, & Wong, 2001; Payne, 2008; Intravia, Pelletier, Wolff, & Baglivio, 2017; Sabatine, Lippold, & Kainz, 2017).

For justice-involved youth, their stigmatized status limits their ability to participate in school academic, extracurricular, and social activities, further alienating them from school communities and discouraging their school reentries. They perceive school and school personnel as unfairly rejecting them, so they, in turn, reject school. Their disconnection from the school community leaves them vulnerable to community and peer influences that contribute to further unlawful behavior.

Study participants had mixed opportunities to form school bonds when they reentered school after their involvements with the juvenile justice system. Stephanie, Marcus, and Henry believed that their juvenile justice system involvement and their stigmatized statuses severed their existing school bonds and hindered formation of new bonds. They recalled that school personnel had few or no expectations for their academic success, offered little or no reentry support, and created a socially and emotionally hostile school environment.

Two factors seem to have affected study participants' access to school bonding opportunities: 1). The nature of the school they reentered (public school, alternative school, or specialty program within a public school) and 2). The attitudes of school personnel and their engagement level with study participants. For three study participants, their stigmatization as justice-involved youth limited their relationships with school personnel and restricted or prohibited their participation in school extracurricular activities. In contrast, one study participant avoided stigmatization and found fulfilling school bonds at an alternative school for justice-involved youth.

For example, Stephanie believed that she had accumulated good will with school personnel and had established unshakeable bonds with the school community that would minimize any secondary sanctions she might face, but school personnel restricted or prohibited her academic and extracurricular activities based on her status as a justice-involved youth. Her softball coach cut her from the team, administrators removed her from her position as an office aide, and she lost her place in a dual-enrollment program. Marcus' short return to high school limited his school bond and relationship formation, and he recalled only one brief encounter with a baseball coach who invited him to try out for the team. With the exception of one teacher who Henry encountered after he had been assigned in-school suspension, his memories of his alternative school revealed no opportunities to bond with school personnel or the school community. He described a school community that barely provided an education and created no opportunities for students to establish positive school bonds through extracurricular activities. In contrast, Trayvon encountered a supportive, welcoming environment at an alternative school; he built fulfilling relationships with school personnel, joined the debate team, played basketball, and worked in the school office.

### **Pursuing New School Reentry Research Domains**

The following section discusses new research domains to examine school reentry for justice-involved youth. First, it identifies historical and current trends in school reentry research to provide context for suggested research domains. Second, it suggests school-centered and policy and practice research domains that have received little or no research attention. Third, it proposes lateral expansion of the school exclusion theoretical framework to examine the school experiences of other vulnerable, marginalized populations. Finally, it identifies theoretical frameworks that might provide additional insight into the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth.

#### ***What Drives School Reentry Research?***

Without a better understanding of the factors and interests that have shaped historical and current trends in school reentry research, researchers cannot effectively focus on neglected research domains and provide policymakers and practitioners more diverse data to support policies, practices, and programs that improve school reentry outcomes for justice-involved youth. For example, the existing research literature suggests that positive student-teacher relationships enhance student learning and school adherence; that stronger and more numerous school bonds improve students' connections to school communities; and that schools as institutions and school personnel as institutional agents bestow and withhold present and future social, cultural, and economic capital through access to educational resources. These findings drawn from the research literature provide beneficial knowledge to researchers working in education, sociology, criminology, and psychology; however, they have not always resulted in effective policy and practice. In addition, they provide limited lenses through which to examine the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth. To better determine where school

reentry research has been and better understand where it needs to go, researchers should interrogate the forces that have driven historical and current school reentry research and the policies, practices, and programs such research has inspired.

Two forces seem to play a significant role in school reentry research, policy, and practice trends. First, quantitative methodologies dominate the research literature, leaving little insight into the lived experiences of justice-involved youth undergoing community and school reentry. Second, researchers apply similar theoretical frameworks to their examinations of community and school reentry phenomenon, which often limits the usefulness of their findings for policy, practice, and program improvements.

School reentry research leans heavily toward quantitative examinations of policy, practice, and program outcomes, but the reasons driving researchers' disproportionate focus on quantitative methodology and large data sets remain unclear and speculative, at best. It's also difficult to determine whether quantitative research methodologies drive policy and practice, or whether policy and practice drive this research path, though it is highly likely that a positive correlation exists between policy and practice decisions – and funding and resource allocations – and quantitative studies examining community and school reentry outcomes for justice-involved youth. This relationship between data-driven policy and practice and data-heavy research contributes to a constant recycling or churning of research examining the same or similar community and school reentry phenomena and making the same or similar recommendations for program replacements or changes to improve school reentry (often measured by simple quantitative metrics such as graduation rates or GED attainment) for justice-involved youth. In short, the well-worn quantitative approaches that researchers have applied to school reentry research have broken little new ground and remain limited in their utility.

Researchers examining school reentry also suffer from a silo effect in which useful theoretical frameworks from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, criminology, and health sciences, among others, are dismissed, ignored, or unidentified. The limited literature bases and theoretical lenses that researchers apply to the reentry phenomenon also leave them trapped in a constant cycle of recreating and validating existing research efforts. In turn, this narrow research approach again provides local and state policymakers and practitioners limited or repetitive recommendations to support community and school reentry of justice-involved youth.

### ***New Domains for School Reentry Research***

School reentry research has left multiple domains and phenomenon unexamined, which offers a wealth of opportunities for researchers. Snodgrass Rangel et al. (2020) noted that few school reentry studies have included the voices of returning justice-involved youth, writing: “At the intrapersonal level, most research focuses on students but does not incorporate student voice or examine students’ experiences” (p. 216). They also found a deficit in research examining the relationships between justice-involved youth and school personnel. Significantly, they noted that “many returning youth, however, do not have these relationships, and so research is needed on the ways in which practices, policies, and programs can support their formation” (p. 215). To close the research gaps in school reentry literature, they identified domains for further research derived from Gregory, Skiba and Noguera’s (2010) work: intrapersonal, interpersonal, instructional, systems, institutional complexity, and institutional embeddedness. These six domains can be grouped into two broad categories: school-centered reentry research, comprising intrapersonal, interpersonal, instructional, and systems research domains; and policy and practice reentry research, comprising institutional complexity and institutional embeddedness. These

domains represent fertile opportunities in school reentry research and are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

**School-Centered Reentry Research.** Snodgrass Rangel et al. (2020) note that community and school reentry researchers have concentrated their efforts in limited areas of the intrapersonal domain, which they define as “any characteristics internal to the individual” (p. 214). They characterize historical and current school reentry research as focused on examining student-level outcomes such as recidivism, school completion, and academic achievement and defined by study participant factors such as race, crime severity, learning needs, previous academic achievement, and school attendance. They recommend that researchers focus on the lived experiences of justice-involved youth through their voices as research partners in future research examining school reentry phenomenon and factors arising from the intrapersonal domain.

The interactions between justice-involved youth and school personnel – the interpersonal domain – has received little attention in the research literature and thus offers opportunities for future research. Snodgrass Rangel et al. (2020) define this interpersonal domain as “the quality of group and individual interactions” (p. 214), which they view as interactions between school personnel and justice-involved youth in the context of school reentry. They recommend more research into relationships among justice-involved youth, school personnel, peers, and social services agency and research into programs, policies, and practices that encourage relationship-building among these groups.

Snodgrass et al. (2020) define the instructional domain as pedagogy that includes academic rigor and culturally relevant and responsive curriculum. In their review of the community and school reentry literature, they found no research addressing relationships

between the instructional domain and school reentry. They suggest future research in the instructional domain that incorporates existing research in areas such as disproportionate school discipline, achievement/opportunity gaps, and school environment effects on historically oppressed youth.

The systems domain includes research into school-based behavioral supports and conflict resolution programs. Snodgrass Rangel et al. (2020) suggest adapting positive behavioral interventions and restorative discipline research to examine school reentry. In their view, systems domain research presents opportunities for coordinated efforts among researchers, school personnel, justice-involved youth, and other stakeholders to examine practical interventions to improve school reentry experiences and outcomes. They write: “[T]his is an area ripe for close collaboration with practitioners so that we can design, test, and study school-based interventions aimed at creating systems of support for returning youth” (p. 216).

**Policy and Practice Reentry Research.** Because justice-involved youth often interact with multiple local and state agencies, they encounter complex institutional interactions and conflicts that complicate their school reentry. Snodgrass Rangel et al.’s (2020) description of institutional complexity incorporates multiple formal and informal social organizations and groups, which makes it a diverse domain for further research. They recommend that researchers examine the complex and often uncoordinated interactions and communications among education, juvenile justice, and social services agencies and the relationships among potentially competing and contradictory programs, policies, and practices. They also suggest that researchers partner with justice-involved youth, their families, neighbors, friends, and communities as essential participants in reentry research. They add that theoretical frameworks drawn from other social science disciplines such as organizational theory to examine interagency

coordination and critical theory to center justice-involved youth and their families offer new lenses for reentry research. Finally, they suggest that researchers consider political and policy research theoretical frameworks to examine “the origins, implementation, and consequences of changes to laws, policies, and practices” affecting community and school reentry (Snodgrass Rangel et al., 2020, p. 216).

Institutional complexity appears similar to institutional embeddedness, but institutional complexity focuses on the experiences of justice-involved youth while institutional embeddedness focuses on the relationships between and among institutional actors. Snodgrass Rangel et al. (2020) conceptualize institutional embeddedness as the interaction among different institutions and institutional-level policies and practices. They note that justice-involved youth undergo community and school reentry within a series of nested and overlapping social services, regulatory, and policymaking systems at the local, state, and federal levels, which makes institutional embeddedness an unexamined but crucial research domain. They recommend that researchers adopt organizational and sociological theoretical frameworks to examine school reentry within a hierarchy of school division, state, and federal contexts. They also suggest that research into the relationships among division, state, and federal institutions might improve communication and coordination, identify detrimental reentry policies and practices, and suggest beneficial reentry policies and practices.

### ***Vulnerable and Historically Oppressed Populations***

School exclusion theory offers a possible theoretical framework to examine the school experiences of other vulnerable, marginalized populations who also encounter isolation and alienation through formal and informal school exclusionary processes. Students classified as exceptional learners, English learners, or immigrants might face school exclusionary processes

similar to those faced by justice-involved youth. Research examining the school entry experiences of study participants drawn from these vulnerable, historically oppressed populations through a school exclusion theory lens might offer insight into their perceptions of their relationships with school personnel and peers, engagement with the school community, and access to educational benefits.

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Research indicates that Black youth comprise a disproportionate percentage of the justice-involved youth population (Cauffman, 2021). While Black youth (aged 10-17) represented only 17 % of the national population in 2012, they represented 32 % of all juvenile arrests, 36 % of juvenile court adjudications, and 40 % of youth in secure facilities (Andersen, 2015). A search of the research literature failed to identify reliable demographic data for justice-involved youth undergoing school reentry, but it is reasonable to assume that the disproportionate representation of Black youth in the juvenile justice system leads to disproportionate representation of Black youth in school reentry. Thus, the school reentry experiences of Black justice-involved youth examined through a critical race theory lens likely offers multiple research paths for further inquiry. For example, Ladson-Billings and Tate (2017) in their discussion of critical race theory describe the intersection of race and property in relation to education as a property right that has been denied to Black students. They identify multiple historical and contemporary policies and practices such as segregation, White flight, school vouchers, tracking, gifted programs, and advanced coursework that deny Black students equitable access to educational opportunities. The exclusionary policies and practices that schools impose on justice-involved youth bear striking similarities to the historical and

contemporary exclusionary policies and practices that schools deployed – and often continue to deploy – against Black students.

While this study did not examine race as a factor in study participants' school reentry experiences, Black study participants directly and indirectly identified race-based factors during their interviews. For example, Trayvon noted that the alternative school he attended emphasized culturally relevant pedagogy in its curriculum, which made a positive impression on him and increased his interest in learning. Henry noted that his school and community were predominately Black and questioned whether their demographic compositions directly affected resources available to his school and, thus, indirectly affected his school reentry experience. Marcus noted that the majority of Job Corps staff at the camp he attended identified as Black, and he believed that their identities made it easier for him, as a Black youth, to connect with them and form more trusting relationships. The Black study participants' willingness to discuss their perceptions of the role race played in their school reentry experiences suggests that further research examining school reentry experiences through a critical race theory lens might provide valuable findings to inform policy and practice.

## **Conclusion**

Even though research literature in law, education, sociology, criminology, public policy, and other disciplines have identified the significant role education plays in reducing recidivism, improving community safety, and supporting post-secondary school success, research into the school reentry phenomenon remains largely limited to quantitative examinations of policies, practices, and programs through limited data sources.

A review of school reentry published reports and policy papers from researchers, policy advocates, and government agencies reveals that much of this work neglects a significant data

source at the core of the school reentry experience – justice-involved youth – which leaves incomplete many of the findings and recommendations presented in the research literature. The failure to include justice-involved youth compounds their disempowerment, devalues their earned knowledge, and denies their contributions to a better understanding of a phenomenon that has significant and often irreversible effects on the life courses of similarly situated populations.

School reentry research also has focused on narrow research questions, such as reentry program outcomes, and has neglected more complex and potentially more fruitful research domains. Further research needs to examine the complex social, historical, and political forces affecting school reentry. Research domains incorporating schools, school personnel, and pedagogy; formal and informal school policies and practices; school, social services, and juvenile justice agency relationships; local, state, and federal regulatory schemes; and justice-involved youth and their families, peers, neighbors, and communities present multiple possibilities for examination.

### **Practice Implications and Recommendations**

The qualitative nature of this study limits generalization of its findings, but the emergent themes suggest possibilities for policymaker and practitioner consideration. First, this section discusses the relationship between the juvenile justice system and community schools as a partnership that in some ways creates more barriers to reentry than avenues to success. Second, it describes policies and practices at the individual, classroom, school, division, and state level that impose barriers to justice-involved youth school reentry. Third, it suggests changes to formal and informal school policies and practices to reposition schools as institutions of liberation and school personnel as agents of empowerment.

### **The School-Justice System Partnership**

For justice-involved youth, an arrest and its consequences have significant and lasting effects beyond primary sanctions imposed on them through juvenile justice system adjudication. The secondary sanctions that schools directly and indirectly enact on justice-involved youth affect their statuses, school relationships, educational and extracurricular opportunities, capital ordination and access, and, ultimately, educational attainment. The secondary sanctions that schools impose on justice-involved youth have significant and lasting effects on their future life courses, often surpassing juvenile justice system imposed primary sanctions in severity and duration. In effect, schools extend and enhance the primary sanctions imposed on justice-involved youth for their unlawful community acts.

Schools and school personnel embed disincentives in formal and informal policies and practices that never seem to provide full restoration of rights and opportunities to justice-involve youth, leaving them trapped in a liminal space between juvenile justice system supervision and community and school reintegration. In effect, they suffer the same community ostracism, imposed shame, and opportunity loss that adults returning from jails and prisons also face, but it occurs within the most important and influential community for youth – community schools.

Justice-involved youths' multiple service and educational needs also make schools reluctant to admit or readmit them, leading to efforts to discourage their reentry through exclusionary policies and practices, the establishment of alternative education programs within the school, or forced enrollment in schools geographically separated from their communities. The exclusionary practices that schools impose on justice-involved youth replicate the practices that they endured in secure facilities following the unlawful behavior that led to their juvenile justice system involvement.

## **School Reentry Challenges**

Because formal and informal school policies and practices are developed and enforced by schools and school personnel, these institutions and individuals have a significant influence over the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth; however, schools and school personnel operate within a complex web of interconnected agencies, policies, funding sources, communications networks, data sources, and stakeholders, which compounds challenges to the school reentry process. The following sections discuss the school reentry challenges arising from school culture and environment, multiagency coordination, transition program shortcomings, data sharing, and other institutional and systemic issues that complicate the school reentry process for justice-involved youth.

### ***Hostile Receptions***

Schools and school personnel actively and passively resist the reentry of justice-involved youth. Historical and contemporary school reentry research has focused on quantitative outcomes such as recidivism rates, school attendance, graduation rates, and other measures that policymakers and practitioners believe correlate to the success or failure of reentry programs. Measures such as school attendance and graduation rates also are used to evaluate school academic effectiveness, which state and federal education authorities use to drive budgeting decisions, determine school accreditation, and make school personnel decisions. Because justice-involved youth might possess significant academic, social, and emotional needs, schools and school personnel perceive them as a threat to school performance measures or a drain on limited school resources. The actual and perceived needs of justice-involved youth generate a culture of indifference or outright hostility that they encounter from unreceptive and unwelcoming schools and school personnel.

### ***Communication, Coordination, and Funding Challenges***

Justice-involved youth are often under the supervision of multiple local and state agencies, so communication and coordination among agencies complicates the school reentry process. Sheldon-Sherman (2010) identified the following barriers to school reentry for justice-involved youth: communication failures among stakeholders; policy and procedural inconsistencies between facilities and schools; and incomplete and inefficient allocation of federal Title I, Part D funds to state and local agencies tasked with school reentry. Following an analysis of state school reentry practices, Sheldon-Sherman suggested reforms across three broad areas to improve school reentry, transition services, and educational attainment for justice-involved youth: legislation, guidelines, and funding. This multiprong approach makes up for in idealism for what it lacks in practicality, noting that “the most effective reentry programs are highly structured, contain clear expectations and consequences, demonstrate sensitivity to interpersonal relationships, and last more than nine months” (p. 29). Sheldon-Sherman’s analysis and recommendations incorporate broad legislative, regulatory, and funding proposals and programs drawn from different state policies and practices enacted in response to existing school reentry challenges. It should be noted that that Sheldon-Sherman’s numerous recommendations draw heavily from quantitative research and fail to include data gathered from justice-involved youth who have undergone school reentry and thus have unique insight into a process that directly affects them.

### ***Oversight and Coordination Challenges***

Carter (2018) examined the school reentry challenges facing justice-involved youth and identified two systemic and programmatic shortcomings – inconsistent oversight and insufficient coordination – as the most significant factors adversely affecting school reentry for justice-

involved youth. To overcome these shortcomings, Carter made four recommendations: shift federal Title I, Part D funds to short-term secure facilities; designate an office or individual at the state level to oversee school reentry; make robust data collection a requirement under federal law and regulations; and prohibit SEAs and LEAs from pushing justice-involved youth into alternative schools. Carter's recommendations reflect an institutional reform framework built on the assumption that broad, sweeping changes in federal law and regulations would result in improvements to existing state and local policy and practice for justice-involved youth returning to schools, but like Sheldon-Sherman, Carter ignored justice-involved youth as sources for insight into the factors that affect school reentry outcomes.

### ***Transition Support and Data Collection Challenges***

In a policy brief examining state correctional education and school reentry in all 50 states and providing recommendations to improve reentry, The Council of State Governments Justice Center (CSGJC) (2015) identified policy and practice shortcomings that plagued justice-involved youth during their residence in secure facilities and followed their release and school reentry. The CSGJC noted significant hurdles to successful school reentry, finding that nearly half of the surveyed states failed to designate a single state agency to support justice-involved youth school reentry and over one-third automatically enrolled returning justice-involved youth in alternative schools. Data tracking also presented a challenge, with less than one-half of states collecting data on school reenrollment and less than one-quarter of states collecting data on post-secondary enrollment. The CSGJC recommended that state and local agencies designate transition coordinators to facilitate records transfer and credit acceptance; inform justice-involved youth and their families about educational, vocational, and employment opportunities; coordinate with justice-involved youth and their families to develop plans for reentry educational and vocational

opportunities; and coordinate school reentry, information sharing, and placement. The CSGJC suggested policy changes to improve coordination between juvenile justice and education agencies to develop transition plans and record sharing practices; include parents or guardians, teachers, and school counselors in transition plan development; ensure reenrollment prior to release; target reenrollment in the justice-involved youth's home school when circumstances warrant such placement; and limit automatic enrollment in alternative schools. The CSGJC also recommended more robust data collection and data sharing across multiple domains such as academic credit accumulation; math and reading assessment scores; educational program enrollment; diploma, certificate, and credential completion; employment; and military enlistment. Even though the CSGJC collected robust data regarding correctional education and school reentry policies and practices, its findings and recommendations echo similar determinations made in prior and subsequent research reports and policy documents. While its efforts to capture data from all 50 states was laudable, it limited itself to institutional and programmatic data collection and recommendations with no data collection from justice-involved youth.

### ***Advocacy, Information Sharing, and Academic Support Challenges***

In a policy brief advocating for greater interagency collaboration to address the educational needs of justice-involved youth, The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform (CJJR) (2016) at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy identified systemic and programmatic barriers to justice-involved youth school reentry, including difficulty processing and transferring records; inadequate record sharing; and ineffective or nonexistent school reentry services and programs. The CJJR also noted that justice-involved youth confronted individual barriers such as high-risk community environments; academic deficits; stigmatization and

marginalization arising from justice system involvement; inadequate social and financial resources; and challenging reentry system navigation. The CJJR identified recent policies and practices improvements that federal, state, and local agencies have initiated to support correctional education and interagency collaboration to advance educational and vocational attainment for justice-involved youth. The CJJR noted a promising program in Washington state – The Educational Advocate Program (EAP) – that assigns Educational Advocates (EAs) to serve as a mentor and supporter for justice-involved youth to help them navigate community and school reentry and coordinate education, employment, and other services. As the CJJR (2016) noted, “EAs ensure that youth’s educational and career goals are included in the re-entry plan and provide youth with necessary resources to succeed in school while filling the role of the supportive adult in their lives” (p. 14). While the CJJR identified that anecdotal and survey results indicated improved educational and vocational outcomes for justice-involved youth and greater satisfaction with the community and school reentry process among stakeholders, including justice-involved youth and their families and supporters, it acknowledged a need for more robust examination of EAP to better understand its impact. It should be noted that EAP relies on positive relationships between justice-involved youth and adults who have been tasked with providing mentorship, support, and advocacy. The EA program also provides a designated advocate for justice-involved youth and encourages their cooperation and engagement in the reentry process.

### ***Conclusion***

Schools serve as powerful social institutions in their communities, and school personnel occupy positions that give them significant direct and indirect influence over the lives of their students. Because schools and school personnel have such prominent, visible presences in

communities, political and community leaders, policymakers, practitioners, parents, and caregivers expect them to deliver social and community services for which they are underfunded, poorly resourced, and unprepared, which leads schools and school personnel to perform “educational triage,” with vulnerable, marginalized groups such as justice-involved youth who often have the greatest needs receiving the least support. Researchers have identified specific challenges to school reentry and presented recommendations for changes and improvements to improve reentry outcomes, but it remains unclear whether schools and school personnel have incentives to accept and support a population that they possibly view as a threat to school performance measures or a drain on limited school resources.

### **School Reentry Reimagined**

The reentry challenges that justice-involved youth face arise from multiple institutional and systemic sources, but schools and school personnel create the most significant and pervasive challenges simply because they have the most contact and interaction with justice-involved youth undergoing school reentry. Thus, school and school personnel provide the best opportunity for school reentry policy and practice reforms. The following sections present recommendations for reforms to school policies and practices and school personnel training and support.

### ***Schools as Institutions of Liberation***

Supporting justice-involved youth during the challenging and perilous school reentry experience falls within schools’ existing mission and resources. In addition, the significant influence that schools have as institutions serving diverse populations position them to pursue more equitable and just outcomes for justice-involved youth (Barrett & Martina, 2012). Yet existing practice guidance draws little from the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth, which hinders the development of effective and appropriate school reentry programs and

professional development training to better facilitate reentry and improve educational outcomes for this vulnerable, marginalized population.

Study participants identified challenges that confronted their school reentry and suggested solutions for reducing the challenges that justice-involved youth face in transition from juvenile justice supervision to school communities. Participants' observations often complement, supplement, or expand on existing practice recommendations drawn from the research literature. This section describes the recommendations study participants' suggested to improve school reentry for justice-involved youth and places their recommendations alongside current and proposed transition practices.

**Destigmatize Justice-Involved Youth.** Labeling theory suggests that stigmatizing labels associated with justice-involved youth activate preprogrammed assumptions about them and influence school personnel reactions to them. In response to these preprogrammed assumptions, school personnel place justice-involved youth in an underclass defined as unworthy of full access to the educational benefits schools bestow on favored groups. In this study's findings, all study participants identified stigmatizing labels, and the characteristics that they believed school personnel associated with the labels, as adversely affecting their school reentry experiences and often triggering formal and informal secondary sanctions. Liberman, Kirk, and Kim (2014) describe secondary sanctioning as detrimental to successful school reentry. They recommend that schools and school personnel adopt three reforms to reduce the effects of stigmatizing labels on justice-involved youth: 1). Decriminalize minor misbehavior and limit law enforcement involvement to serious delinquent acts; 2). Increase juvenile record confidentiality; and 3). Reassign justice-involved youth to different schools when they return. The reforms that they recommend are designed to minimize school and school personnel negative preconceptions of

justice-involved youth and, thus, reduce the likelihood that they will experience secondary sanctioning effects due to their dishonored statuses.

**Remove Institutional and Human Barriers.** School reentry researchers and justice-involved youth advocates identify school policies and practices and school personnel knowledge and perceptions as essential areas for reform. They argue that policy and practice reforms and professional development training in these areas will likely have significant positive effects on the reentry experiences of justice-involved youth. Hirschfield's (2014) review of school reentry research and practices emphasized programmatic and systemic changes to facilitate school reentry and increase educational attainment. He considered the following practices to be "effective and promising": accurate assessment of the student's skills and goals; curricular continuity for returning students; rapid reenrollment in the destination school; and transition support services.

Researchers also have suggested that schools identify and revise or remove school policies and practices that discourage school reentry or that disregard state and federal legal and regulatory requirements.

[I]t is recommended that schools examine existing policies to assess their impact, specifically related to ensuring equitable outcomes for under- or overrepresented youth. Furthermore, professional development requirements should be put in place within school districts to increase knowledge and compliance related to school re-entry and juvenile justice legislation at both the state and federal level that impact school practice. (Kubek et al., 2020, p. 7)

Researchers also have identified professional development for school personnel as a means to create more positive school environments and encourage more reentry support. They recommend

increasing school personnel knowledge of justice-involved youth and their social and academic needs to inform school personnel perceptions of justice-involved youth and encourage school personnel support for justice-involved youth during school reentry.

[S]chools should provide ongoing professional development for all staff to enhance their understanding of student need related to academic achievement, behavior, and social-emotional well-being, as well as opportunities to learn and practice strategies to reflect that understanding, and for focused training in areas that may be particularly impactful for youth returning from the juvenile justice system such as trauma-informed care, restorative justice practices, and school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports. (Kubek et al., 2020, p. 7-8)

In addition, researchers recommend changes to school culture and environment to support school reentry. They note that reforms at the school level that encourage relationship-building and promote individual safety have benefits not only for justice-involved youth but also for other students as well.

[S]chool-wide practices should be established to develop an effective framework for a school culture that promotes success for all students, and that enhances equity within the re-entry process. Specifically, school practices that promote the development of positive teacher-student relationships, foster safety and community within the school environment are recommended. (Kubek et al., 2020, p. 8)

Study participants noted that they had few positive reasons to feel connected to school personnel and peers. They not only faced resistance to relationship formation but also encountered assumptions about their behavior, academic capabilities, and school engagement. In addition, the stigmatizing labels arising from their status led school personnel to subject them to

enhanced monitoring, oversight, and further academic and social sanctions. They believed that common school misbehaviors that typically might have warranted minor, temporary sanctions, or no sanctions at all, result in more significant sanctions that could have placed them out of compliance with juvenile justice system requirements, led to their removal from school, and resulted in reimposition of suspended sentences and other juvenile justice system consequences.

Because justice-involved youth face prejudgment for their stigmatized statuses and encounter indifference or outright hostility from school personnel, they feel unheard, unsupported, and unwanted. This sense of isolation and displacement permeates school reentry experiences and creates feelings of frustration and hopelessness, especially for justice-involved youth who lack family and community support systems and must navigate multiple complex juvenile justice and social service systems without allies and advocates.

**Encourage School Engagement.** In theory, the juvenile justice system exists to adjudicate delinquent youth and provide them the supervision and support that they need to abstain from further unlawful behavior. In practice, the juvenile justice system imposes primary sanctions on youth in a punitive response to their unlawful behavior. Schools often supplement juvenile justice system sanctions through informal secondary sanctions such as academic program restrictions, athletic team removal, and teacher- and peer-imposed social isolation. This secondary sanctioning process does not arise organically but instead springs from school personnel who view involvement with the juvenile justice system as a moral failure worthy of judgment and condemnation. This secondary sanctioning has significant negative effects on a justice-involved youth's school engagement, especially if they believe that former allies and advocates among school personnel feel betrayed or disappointed in their unlawful behavior and withdraw support that justice-involved youth need for successful school reentry.

Research indicates that school bonds arise through different connections youth form with their school community and that youth who feel stronger connections to the school community reap the benefits of such connections (Resnick et al., 1997; Eccles et al., 1997). McNeely, Nonnemaker, and Blum (2002) found that four factors – classroom management climate, school size, discipline policy severity, and participation rates in extracurricular activities – influenced students’ feelings of school engagement. In describing the effect participation in extracurricular activities had on students’ feelings of engagement, they wrote: “as more students participate in extracurricular activities during or after school, overall connectedness is higher” (p. 145).

Researchers examining school engagement have proposed recommendations and reforms to encourage school bonds. Finn (1989) identified six guidelines that policymakers and practitioners could adopt to reduce school alienation among marginalized and vulnerable groups such as justice-involved youth: “voluntary participation for the students, clear and consistent educational goals, small school size, student participation in policy decisions and management, extended and cooperative relationships with school staff, and work that is meaningful to the student” (Finn, 1989, p. 124). More recent recommendations arose from a 2003 invitational conference titled “School Connectedness – Strengthening Health and Educational Outcomes for Teens,” which gave rise to The Wingspread Declaration on School Connections. The Wingspread Declaration broadly described paths to create stronger school bonds among students, adults, and the school community:

School connectedness can be built through fair and consistent discipline, trust among all members of the school community, high expectations from the parents and school staff, effective curriculum and teaching strategies, and students feeling connected to at least one member of the school staff. (Blum & Libbey, p. 232)

The Wingspread Declaration's multiprong approach addresses different factors simultaneously and necessarily overlaps with constructing more positive, fulfilling relationships among justice-involved youth and school personnel; however, focusing only on positive relationships neglects other dimensions of the school environment that also offer engagement opportunities.

**Provide Access to Educational Benefits.** The labeling-isolation-alienation cycle for justice-involved youth progresses through connected, overlapping phases. It begins with the stigmatizing labels that the juvenile justice system assigns to justice-involved youth and continues under the secondary sanctions that schools and school personnel impose on them. In response, justice-involved youth resist engagement in a school community that they feel devalues and disrespects them. This action-reaction cycle hinders formation of school bonds through relationships with school personnel and peers, participation in academic and extracurricular activities, and integration into the school community. Because justice-involved youth are denied opportunities to form school bonds, they become further isolated and alienated and lose access to a precious resource – school-based capitals embodied in educational benefits.

### *School Personnel as Agents of Empowerment*

Limited attention has been given to the most important factor in successful school reentry – the relationships among school personnel and justice-involved youth. Because school personnel constantly interact with justice-involved youth during and after school reentry, they likely have significant influence over school reentry experiences.

School personnel serve as institutional agents enforcing the formal and informal rules of the education field and controlling ordination of existing capitals and access to future capitals. As institutional agents, school personnel have the autonomy to disempower justice-involved youth and other vulnerable, marginalized groups and isolate them from school communities. The

enforcement actions that institutional agents perform against justice-involved youth not only reduce their future opportunities through restrictions within the field but also eliminate their future opportunities through exclusion from the field. Scott (2012) argues that school personnel as institutional agents have the power to overcome their own domination, abandon their assigned roles as enforcers of symbolic violence, and reimagine their relationships to schools and students. She writes:

As with all things on a continuum, critical incidents carry a range of possibility for us as we experience them—from closing them off (accepting and not questioning institutional practices), to naming critical incidents, and then either dismissing them after naming them, utilizing them for reflection, and ideally, utilizing them for action. It is in this last scenario that we confront the terms of misrecognition, come to understand the true nature of our relationship to an institution, and then engage the institution under new terms. We not only erase our own compliance to our own domination, but come to a new understanding of how to challenge the true conditions of domination. (p. 536)

Barrett and Martina (2012) also suggest that school personnel should use their positions in schools and relationships with youth to disrupt the reproduction of inequities. They write: “As Stanton-Salazar notes, we must realize that in addition to teaching, teachers often serve as key participants in the social networks of students and ‘play a determining role in either reproducing or *interfering with the reproduction of class, racial, and gendered inequality*’” (2001, p. 161; emphasis added). (Barrett & Martina, 2012, p. 258). But for school personnel to serve as agents of empowerment, they must first liberate themselves.

**Empowerment Rooted in an Ethic of Care.** School personnel often assume that justice-involved youth create additional burdens on schools and threaten school performance metrics. In

response the perceived threat that justice-involved youth represent, schools and school personnel impose secondary sanctions on them that discretely and effectively push them out of public schools and into alternative schools and alternative education programs, onto the streets, or back into the juvenile justice system. For teachers, schools, and school divisions, the best solution that meets their professional and institutional goals also happens to be the worst solution for returning justice-involved youth – that they do not return to public schools at all.

Successful school reentry has the potential to serve as a release valve for the school-to-prison pipeline, but existing exclusionary processes described in this study adversely shape the relationships between school personnel and justice-involved youth. Study participants' experiences emphasize the importance of relationships between themselves and school personnel and the role such relationships played in their school reentry and educational outcomes.

Study participants' positive and negative memories of the care they received from school personnel identified two factors present in their school reentry experiences: 1). The desire that they had to feel cared for during their reentries; and 2). The lack of care that school personnel showed them. The gap between the care that study participants needed and the care that school personnel gave them suggests that closing this gap might have improve reentry experiences and positively influence educational outcomes. Noddings' ethic of care, a moral philosophy emphasizing relationships, contains a framework to bridge this care gap by guiding school personnel toward reimagining the relationships they form with justice-involved youth. In Noddings view of human experience, relationships are the foundation of all interaction. She writes: "Every human life starts in relation, and it is through relations that a human individual emerges" (2012, p. 771). Noddings identified essential characteristics present in a person who assumes the role of a caregiver and pursues a caring environment: listening, thinking, creating a

climate for caring, and extending the moral climate. These characteristics exist on a continuum, with listening serving as the entry point into the relationships arising within the practical framework defined by an ethic of care.

But listening entails more than simply registering a voiced or unvoiced need and responding to that need; listening embodies a willingness in the caregiver to hear the experiences of the cared-for and respond to those expressed needs, not the perceived needs arising from the caregiver, or the institutional or organizational needs imposed from outside of the caregiver/cared-for relationship. Noddings writes: “From the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as carer is interested in the expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study” (2012, p. 772). The ethic of care provides a framework to reimagine the relationships between school personnel and justice-involved youth and situate those relationships in a moral philosophy designed to nurture and encourage justice-involved youth.

### **Study Limitations**

This study encountered limitations arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, researcher bias, and transferability. The following section discusses these limitations and their possible effects on data collection, analysis, interpretation.

#### **COVID-19 Effects**

The COVID-19 pandemic created unexpected challenges that had significant but manageable effects on this study. While the purpose, research questions, and theoretical framework remained unaffected, COVID-19 required reassessment of this study’s methodology and changes to recruiting, study population, and data collection.

### *Recruiting*

I had hoped to examine school reentry through the experiences of justice-involved youth as they returned to school. When I first developed this study's research questions and methodology, I believed that younger study participants who were undergoing school reentry would provide raw, emotional data that would reveal deeper truths through the immediacy of their responses to their reentry experiences. Because the pandemic led to schools halting in-person instruction, school reentries for justice-involved youth simply stopped taking place. This left me with study questions about the reentry experiences of justice-involved youth and a strong theoretical framework but without a population to study. To address the unexpected disappearance of the population I had hoped to examine, I refocused the study's recruiting pool on adults who had juvenile justice system contact and had undergone school reentry as adolescents. I shifted recruiting efforts from middle and high schools to nonprofit community reentry programs available to justice-involved adults. This recruiting modification to this study generated a pool of study participants who had experienced school reentry but were not affected by COVID-19 school closures during the 2020-21 school year.

COVID-19 guidelines restricting contact with individuals outside of immediate family members also complicated recruiting efforts, for it prevented face-to-face meetings with potential study participants at community reentry program offices. While the program office directors and staff members supported my recruiting efforts and disseminated recruiting flyers for me, I believe the lack of face-to-face contact made it more difficult to establish trust with potential study participants and build working relationships with reentry program directors and staff members. I overcame the trust and relationship hurdles by investing more time in direct communication with program directors and staff members who increased their support for my

research. The relationships that I established with program directors and staff members seemed to increase potential study participants' willingness to trust me and consider study participation.

### ***Study population***

I anticipated and encountered positives and negatives in relying on older study participants who were separated by years or even decades from their school reentry experiences, but I believe the decision to examine this group ultimately generated richer, thicker data. The maturity and reflection the study participants had achieved through distance and time was apparent in their thoughtful, insightful interview sessions. They seemed to have reached places in their life courses where they could consider all the factors that affected their school reentry experiences, including their positive and negative contributions to the experiences. They also had continued their educations beyond what they had achieved as adolescents, so they had more knowledge to contextualize and explain their school reentry experiences.

### ***Data collection***

When I developed the first plan for this study's methodology, I had hoped to conduct semi-structured interviews with study participants in conference rooms at participating reentry program offices, but the pandemic made this plan untenable. I conducted the interviews through an online video conferencing application and by internet phone service, which limited my observations of the study participants' body language, facial expressions, and, to some degree, tone, pacing, word choice, and other secondary data typically generated through face-to-face study participant interviews. I do not believe that data collection limitations had a significant adverse effect on the data quality, but it is possible that the limitations affected limited aspects of the data analysis and interpretation.

## **Researcher Bias**

As a researcher who has worked with justice-involved youth in my professional positions in education, law, and journalism, it was difficult at times to divorce my lived experiences from the lived experiences that study participants shared with me. At times I found that study participants' stories angered and saddened me, for it seemed that they had been punished twice for their unlawful behavior – first through adjudication in the juvenile justice system and then through secondary sanctions in schools. Study participants also were compelling storytellers who shared visceral experiences in such honest, direct terms that it was difficult to not become more deeply engaged with the challenges that they had faced.

I had anticipated that I would experience emotional engagement with study participants' stories, so I had established safeguards to ensure that my subjective reactions to study participants lived experiences remained separate from my objective data analysis and interpretation. My research journals and peer debriefings provided the strongest guardrails against possible bias arising from my interactions and empathy with study participants. I kept notes in my research journal during the interviews, which allowed me to capture my emotional reactions on paper and exclude them from my interactions with study participants during the interviews. This also let me distinguish my emotional reactions from study participants' emotional reactions and helped me avoid imposing my views on their experiences. I also relied on my peer debriefers to provide anchor points for me during the data collection and analysis stages. They also helped me distinguish my role as an objective researcher from my study participants roles as subjective data sources. They also reviewed my code book and coded a partial transcript to provide a triangulation and bias check for me.

The biggest challenge was not minimizing my researcher bias to avoid tainting my data collection, analysis, and presentation. It was ensuring my study participants understood that I empathized with them during our interviews, appreciated their honesty and openness about their school reentry experiences, and valued their contributions not only as data sources but also as people. I worked to build their trust in me and promised to represent their school reentry experiences honestly and fairly in this study. I believe I maintained an effective balance between objective, dispassionate researcher and subjective, empathetic human being. I hope the transparency and detail that I have provided throughout this research report supports that interpretation as well.

### **Transferability**

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research typically lacks generalizability (Guba, 1981; Maxwell, 2013), but it often offers transferability in its methodology and theoretical framework (Yin, 1994; Tellis, 1997a). Before developing my research purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and methodology, I gave a great deal of thought as to what I hoped to accomplish with this study. First, I knew a qualitative approach would not allow for irrefutable, generalizable findings for policy and practice applications. Second, I hoped to explore a possible theoretical framework that might provide a more comprehensive explanation of the school reentry phenomenon experienced by justice-involved youth, and I hope the theoretical framework would have utility for future studies examining the same or similar school reentry phenomenon. Third, I wanted to test a methodology that incorporated study participant voice as a primary qualitative data source to demonstrate its utility as a complement to quantitative data sources for research examining school and community for justice-involved youth. Fourth, I intended to contribute a new research perspective on the school reentry

experiences of justice-involved youth to provide policymakers and practitioners material for discussions regarding policy, practice, and program adoption, implementation, evaluation, and reform. Finally, I believed that research inspires researchers, so I hoped that my use of a different theoretical framework and data from a new data source might encourage more researchers working in education, juvenile justice, sociology, criminology, and public policy to examine the school reentry phenomenon, develop or adopt new theoretical frameworks, and include justice-involved youth as primary data sources in their work. While I believe that I have much more work to do at the intersection of justice reform, education, and equity, I also believe that I have laid solid foundations for the goals that I set for this study. Even though I cannot generalize the findings I developed from this work, I look forward to developing school exclusion theory in future studies and incorporating the voices of justice-involved youth as primary data sources in those efforts.

### **Conclusion**

As youth enter adolescence and begin their secondary educations, schools, school personnel, and peers assume significant roles in their lives, influencing their social and emotional development and shaping their life courses. For justice-involved youth, reentering school communities that have such pervasive and powerful influence over their perceptions of self, formation of relationships and attachments, and access to educational benefits presents significant challenges. This study's theoretical framework suggested that exclusionary policies and practices enforced by school personnel as institutional agents treated justice-involved youth as a disfavored group and discouraged their successful school reentry. More specifically, the stigma imposed on them for their juvenile justice system involvement thrust them into a devalued, marginalized underclass within the school community, restricted their ability to

establish positive reputations, limited their school engagement and prosocial relationship opportunities, and denied them access to future social, economic, and cultural capitals embodied in educational benefits. This study's findings suggest that a new theoretical framework – school exclusion theory – comprised of elements drawn from labeling, social control, and field theories has possible utility to accurately describe the exclusionary process that justice-involved youth and other disfavored, marginalized groups encounter when they enter or reenter schools.

Stephanie's, Trayvon's, Marcus', and Henry's school reentry experiences as justice-involved youth shared striking similarities to the stigmatization, isolation, and alienation process described in this study's theoretical framework. The anecdotes and observations that they shared also suggest the existence of three emergent themes that frame the school reentry experiences of justice-involved youth: 1). School reentry is a life-altering event with lifelong effects. 2). Institutional and human barriers deter school reentry and integration/reintegration into school communities. 3). School personnel as gatekeepers provide disfavored groups inequitable access to educational benefits. These themes take on even more significance when they are compared and contrasted against Stephanie's, Trayvon's, Marcus', and Henry's different school reentry points, school divisions, life and family circumstances, demographics, and geographic locations.

In addition to framing the school reentry experience, the three emergent themes also identify inflection points where instituting new policies, practices, and programs – or reforming existing policies, practices, and programs – might have the most significant positive effects on the school reentry experiences and educational outcomes of justice-involved youth. First, greater social and emotional support will reduce the transition trauma that justice-involved youth might experience during school reentry. Second, revision or elimination of school policies and practices that impose secondary sanctions on justice-involved youth will decrease the barriers that they

confront during school reentry. Third, professional development that retrains school personnel to act as agents of empowerment guided by an ethic of care will redefine the relationship between school personnel and justice-involved youth as a relationship between caregiver and cared-for. These recommendations serve as starting points for institutional and school personnel policy, practice, and program introduction and reform. Additional research examining this study's emergent themes in different school reentry contexts with different populations of justice-involved youth will contribute to a better understanding of the factors shaping school reentry experiences and provide additional guidance to remove barriers to reentry, create pathways to reintegration, and hopefully improve educational outcomes for this vulnerable, marginalized population.

Ideal school reentry scenarios envision schools presenting opportunities for justice-involved youth to escape their status as offenders, build positive social bonds with school personnel and peers, and access social, economic, and cultural capitals. The reentry experiences described by study participants indicate that significant challenges exist to successful school reentry for justice-involved youth, but their stories also point toward opportunities for research, reform, and reimagination.

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## Appendix A

When you were young, did you become involved with the juvenile justice system?

Did you return to school after your involvement?

Would you like to share your experiences with others?

If you answered “Yes” to these questions, then you are eligible to be part of a study of adults young people who returned to school after they were involved with the juvenile justice system as adolescents. Study participants will receive monetary compensation for their time.

What will I do as part of the study?

- You will meet with the researcher twice (about an hour for each time) via Zoom videoconferencing.
- The researcher will video and audio record the two conversations to use the information to explain to others what the school re-entry experience is like for young people.
- The researcher will share with you his reflections on the two conversations to make sure that he understood what you said and how you felt about your experiences.
- Neither your image, name, nor any other information that could identify you to others will be used. You will be given a pseudonym in the written report to protect your personal information and identity.
- You will receive compensation for participating in the study.

How do I join the study?

Participation is completely voluntary. If you would like to participate or learn more, please contact the researcher or let your program director know you are interested in speaking to the researcher.

Researcher: Peter Willis

Email: [willisp@mymail.vcu.edu](mailto:willisp@mymail.vcu.edu)

Google Voice: (804) 464-8261

## Appendix B

Good morning/afternoon.

Thank you for meeting with me today via Zoom. My name is Peter Willis, and I am a PhD student in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am speaking to you today about participating in my research study. This is a study about how young people experience returning to school after they have been involved with the juvenile justice system. You are eligible to be in this study because you have had this experience as a youth. I obtained your contact information from the reentry program you are working with now as an adult.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will meet with me twice via Zoom to talk about your experiences with returning to school after you had contact with the juvenile justice system. I would like to audio and video record our two conversations and then use the information to explain to others what the school re-entry experience is like for young people. I also would like to share with you my reflections on our conversations to make sure that I understood what you said and how you felt about your experiences. I will not use your image, name, or any other information that could identify you to others. I will give you a pseudonym in my written report to protect your personal information and identity.

You will be compensated for your participation in this study.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you would like to participate, we can go ahead and schedule a time for me to contact you to give you more information. If you need more time to decide if you would like to participate, you may also call or email me with your decision.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

If you have any more questions about this process or if you need to contact me about participation, I may be reached at [willisp@mymail.vcu.edu](mailto:willisp@mymail.vcu.edu).

Thank you so much for your time today. Here is my contact information:

Peter Willis

Email: [willisp@mymail.vcu.edu](mailto:willisp@mymail.vcu.edu)

Google Voice: (804) 464-8261

## Appendix C

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

**STUDY TITLE:** Labels, Social Bonds, and Capital in School Reentry Experiences and Educational Outcomes of Justice-Involved Youth

**VCU INVESTIGATOR:** Peter Sean Willis, PhD student in the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education Curriculum, Culture, and Change track

*NOTE: In this consent form, “you” always refers to the research participant.*

#### ABOUT THIS CONSENT FORM

You are being invited to participate in a research study. **It is important that you carefully think about whether being in this study is right for you and your situation.**

This consent form is meant to assist you in thinking about whether or not you want to be in this study. **Please ask the investigator to explain any information in this consent document that is not clear to you.** You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide to not participate in this study. If you do participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision not to take part or to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you agree to participate in this study, then you will receive \$25 compensation per one-hour interview session. The compensation will be mailed to you in the form of a Visa gift card.

#### AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY AND KEY INFORMATION

The purpose of this research study is to find out about the experiences of people who became involved with the juvenile justice system and then transitioned back to school. This study will allow us to learn more about those experiences.

In this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. Participate in one or two virtual (via Zoom) one-on-one video and audio recorded interviews with the researcher.
2. Respond to interview follow-up questions, if necessary, to clarify your interview responses.

Your participation in this study will last up to one hour for each of the one-on-one interview sessions. Approximately 4-8 individuals will participate in the interviews for this study.

**Please read, or have someone read to you, the rest of this document. If there is anything you do not understand, be sure to ask the researcher.**

### **Non-Physical Risks**

Participation in research might involve some loss of privacy. There is a small risk that someone outside the research study could see and misuse information about you.

Questionnaires and interviews may contain questions that are sensitive in nature. You may refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

You also may learn things about yourself that you did not know before and that could affect how you think about yourself.

### **CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?**

You can stop being in this research study at any time. Tell the researcher if you are thinking about stopping or decide to stop.

### **WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?**

If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this research, contact:

**Peter Willis**

**willisp@vcu.edu**

The researcher named above is the best person to call for questions about your participation in this study.

If you have general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, you may contact:

**Virginia Commonwealth University Office of Research**

**800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000**

**Box 980568**

**Richmond, VA 23298**

**Telephone: (804) 827-2157**

Contact this number to ask general questions, to obtain information or offer input, and to express concerns or complaints about research. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the researcher or if you wish to talk to someone else. General information about participation in research studies can also be found at **<http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm>**.

Do not sign this consent form unless you have had a chance to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers to all of your questions.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

I have been provided with an opportunity to read this consent form carefully. All of the questions that I wish to raise concerning this study have been answered. By signing this consent form, I have not waived any of the legal rights or benefits to which I otherwise would be entitled. My signature indicates that I freely consent to participate in this research study and acknowledge that the information I provide might be used in future studies or research reports. If the information is used in future studies or research reports, I understand that the information I provide will be anonymized to protect my identity. I will receive \$25 compensation per one-hour interview session. The compensation will be mailed to me in the form of a Visa gift card. I will receive a copy of the consent form/permission form for my records.

<b>Signature Block for Enrolling Adult Participants</b>	
_____	
Adult Participant Name (Printed)	
_____	
_____	
Adult Participant's Signature	Date
_____	
Name of Person Conducting Consent Discussion (Printed)	
_____	
_____	
Signature of Person Conducting Consent Discussion	Date
_____	
_____	
Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)	Date

## **Appendix D**

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

#### **Opening of Interview**

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is Peter Willis, and I am a PhD candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University. The purpose of this interview is to gather information about your experience re-entering public school after your involvement with the juvenile justice system. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I'm conducting this interview as research for my PhD dissertation. I want to let you know that your answers will be incorporated into my dissertation, but your image and name will not be attached to any responses you give during this interview. The information you share with me will be used to understand more about how young people experience school re-entry after they have been involved with the juvenile justice system. I will be reading most of my questions during the interview to ensure that my interviews with every participant will be consistent.

Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. All data will be reported without reference to any individual(s).

We have scheduled 60 minutes for the interview. The interview will be semi-structured around a list of areas of interest. The questions are intended to be open-ended, and any insight you have about the different issues is appreciated. At any point during the interview you may ask that I skip a question or stop the interview all together. For ease of our discussion and accuracy, I will video and audio record our meeting as indicated in the Informed Consent. After the data is recorded and transcribed, I will send it to you via e-mail so you may review your responses for accuracy.

Before we begin, I will review some guidelines that will help the session run smoothly. I will audio and video record the session so that I can accurately capture all of your comments; it will be helpful if you speak clearly. Please know that you can stop being interviewed at any point during the interview. I also want to assure you of complete confidentiality, so please do not use your name during today's session. I also ask that you don't identify specific teachers, administrators, classmates, or other people in your responses, so please do not use their names or other information that could reveal who they are. In the written summaries of the session, no names will be attached to comments.

I'm interested in all your thoughts – both positive and negative – so please don't censor yourself. When responding to the questions, please try to be as specific as possible.

Do you have any questions before we begin? OK, let's get started.

### **Stage-Setting Questions**

1. Could you please describe how you became involved with the juvenile justice system?
2. How did you feel during your involvement with the juvenile justice system?
3. How long were you away from school before you returned?
4. How did you feel about school when you were younger, before you became involved with the juvenile justice system?
  - a. Probe: How did you do in your classes?
  - b. Probe: How much involvement did you have with school activities?
  - c. Probe: Without using names or other identifying information, how would you describe your relationships with your teachers?
  - d. Probe: Without using names or other identifying information, how would you describe your relationships with your classmates?

**RQ1: How do justice-involved youth experience school reentry?**

5. How comfortable were you returning to school after being away?
  - a. Probe: What made you feel comfortable?
  - b. Probe: What made you feel uncomfortable?
6. How did you feel on your first day back in school?
  - a. Probe: Can you describe what happened to you that day?
  - b. Probe: Did that first day back turn out as you expected? Why? Why not?
7. How did your feelings about coming back to school change after that first day?
8. What were the most positive things about returning to school?
9. What were the most negative things about returning to school?

**RQ2: How do justice-involved youth perceive their relationships with school personnel and peers?**

10. Without using names or other identifying information, how did the adults in your school respond to you when you came back?
  - a. Probe: Why do you believe that they responded to you that way?
  - b. Probe: Without using names or other identifying information, can you tell me about an encounter that led you to think this way?
11. Without using names or other identifying information, how would you describe the relationships you had with your teachers?
  - c. Probe: Without using names or other identifying information, did your teachers encourage and support you in class?
12. Without using names or other identifying information, how would you describe the relationships you had with school administrators?

- d. Probe: Without using names or other identifying information, can you describe how administrators interacted with you? Positively? Or negatively?
13. Without using names or other identifying information, can you identify an adult in the school who you viewed as a mentor or a supporter?
- e. Probe: If yes, what did the adult do to support you?
  - f. Probe: If no, do you think a mentor or supporter would have been helpful? Why?
14. Without using names or other identifying information, how did your classmates respond to you after you came back?
- a. Probe: Why do you believe that they responded to you that way?
  - b. Probe: Can you tell me about an encounter that led you to think this way?

**RQ3: How do justice-involved youth perceive their school engagement opportunities?**

15. How would you describe your place in the school community after you came back?
16. How would you describe your involvement with extracurricular activities like clubs, sports, dances, athletic events, and other non-academic activities connected to the school?
- a. Probe: If you participated in school activities, why did you choose to participate?
  - b. Probe: If not, why did you choose not to participate?

**RQ4: How do justice-involved youth perceive their access to educational benefits?**

17. Without using names or other identifying information, can you describe what your teachers, administrators, or counselors did to help you succeed in school?
18. Without using names or other identifying information, do you believe that teachers, counselors, and other adults gave you the same help and support as your classmates?

19. Without using names or other identifying information, do you believe that adults in your school helped you get ready for college or a career?

**RQ5: How do justice-involved youth perceive the relationship between their school reentry experience and their educational outcomes?**

20. Did you stay in school and graduate, or did you leave?

a. Probe: What encouraged you to stay?

b. Probe: What encouraged you to leave?

21. If you left school, did you complete your education (GED, alternative school, etc.)?

22. If you have not completed your education, do you plan on doing so at some point?

**Closing Question(s)**

23. Without using names or other identifying information, describe what you think your school, teachers, counselors, and administrators could have done differently to help you re-enter school.

**Ending Interview**

This concludes the interview. Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time today, and I appreciate your participation.