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PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT REBOUND: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT REBOUND: A QUALITATIVE
STUDY

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Martin Allen Johnson

May 2022

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ABSTRACT

Many formerly incarcerated (FI) individuals choose education to increase the chances of success and lower recidivism. Various interventions like mentoring and reentry programs help alleviate challenges and promote the success of FI students. One reentry program that offers educational and case management services to FI students is Project Rebound (PR). An initiative of the California State University system, PR seeks to enhance student success through support and connections with campus and community resources. However, there is a lack of research on PR's effectiveness. This study attempted to fill this literature gap by exploring the question: How do Project Rebound participants perceive the program's impact on their lives? This study took a qualitative approach toward answering the question by conducting semi-structured interviews with alumni of one PR program (N = 7). Thematic analysis of the data revealed that 1) PR alumni have positive views of the program; 2) PR alumni's program views reflect material services received; 3) PR provides varied services that prove vital to alumni success; and 4) PR has room for improvement. The findings in this study carry major implications for social work, PR, and criminal justice stakeholders by giving voice to a marginalized group and revealing the utility of a social program designed to help members of that population.

Keywords: formerly incarcerated, recidivism, reentry programs, Project Rebound, qualitative research

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to Louise Armelle Johnson, Alvin Allen Johnson Sr, Enola Elaine Johnson, and Alvin Robert Johnson Jr. Louise, my mother and a proud French Canadian Quebécoise, withstood and overcame 1950s societal prejudice by marrying an African American man. She went on to birth three children, Enola, Alvin, and Martin. Alvin Sr., since transitioned, fell in love with and married my mother during turbulent times and served his country as an Air Force sergeant. Enola, a graduate of CSUSB, has supported me over the years no matter the circumstances, and Alvin Jr, although no longer present, was my brother. He would have been proud of my success.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	
Problem Formulation.....	1
Purpose of the Study.....	3
Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice.....	5
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction.....	7
Reentry Challenges.....	7
Financial.....	8
Stigma.....	8
Soft Skills.....	10
Reentry Interventions.....	10
Mentoring.....	10
Reentry Programs.....	11
Project Rebound.....	12
Theories Guiding Conceptualization.....	13
Summary.....	15
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	16
Introduction.....	16

Study Design.....	16
Sampling.....	17
Data Collection and Instruments.....	18
Procedures.....	19
Protection of Human Subjects.....	20
Data Analysis.....	21
Summary.....	21
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	23
Frequency Distributions.....	23
Findings	24
Project Rebound Alumni have Positive Views of the Program.....	25
Project Rebound Alumni's Program Views Reflect Material Services Received	26
Project Rebound Provides Varied Services that Prove Vital to Alumni Success	27
Project Rebound Has Room for Improvement	29
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	31
Introduction	31
Consistency with Previous Research	32
Implication of the Findings for Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy	33
Theory	33
Research	35
Practice.....	36

Policy	37
Limitations	37
Recommendations	38
Conclusion	39
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE	41
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT.....	43
APPENDIX C: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER	46
REFERENCES.....	49

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Sample Demographics	23
Table 2. Study Primary Themes	25

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

In 2018, California federal and state prisons, detention centers, jails, and juvenile facilities held close to 250,000 individuals (California Department of Corrections, 2020). Of those serving time in state prison, 44.2% are Hispanic, 28.3% are Black, 20.9% are White, and 6.6% are other, even though whites make up the bulk of the population (California Department of Corrections, 2020). These sentencing disparities are glaring. Resulting from the state's penchant for locking people up, notably those of color, vital human resources that could otherwise promote societal wellbeing vanish. Resultingly, the effects on individuals, families, communities, and the field of social work are immense.

At micro and macro-systems levels, those who experience incarceration are a potential burden on the community (Murillo, 2019). Additionally, these people suffer clear disadvantages in life. For example, the formerly incarcerated (FI) experience barriers to employment and housing that most people do not. Because of this reality, individuals often employ extralegal strategies to succeed, causing recidivism (Augustine, 2019). Even if one does not immediately return to prison, that individual will likely lack housing opportunities due to their status. Public housing often screens out formerly incarcerated people, even when drug charges or sex crimes are not an issue (Crowell, 2017). Since a disproportionate

number of system-impacted people are low-income, they often rely on a public housing system biased against them (Butler, 2013).

To overcome some of the myriad roadblocks justice system impacted individuals encounter, many pursue higher education. Statistics show that bachelor's degree holders are 50% less likely to be unemployed than those with a high school degree (Abel & Deitz, 2014). FI individuals pursuing college degrees to increase employment and enhance their quality of life often look for supportive on-campus programs for assistance with reaching education goals. A university campus program that intervenes in system-impacted individuals' lives to raise the likelihood of their scholastic success is Project Rebound (PR).

PR initially started at San Francisco State University in 1967 and has since developed into a consortium of 14 campus programs (California State Fullerton, 2020; CSU Project Rebound, 2021.). The strategic plan for this study's PR lists the consortium's mission as supporting FI students' successful societal reintegration using various interventions (Project Rebound Consortium, 2019). Although not all social workers, the program primarily employs those from that field to meet the served population's educational needs. John Irwin, PR's founder, believed that a campus support program tailored explicitly to FI individuals' needs would improve reintegration outcomes (Irwin, 1969).

When afforded possibilities, like higher education, ex-offenders tend to thrive. According to the California State University (CSU) Project Rebound information page, CSU students in 2018 had an 84.3% retention rate compared

to 89.8% for PR students (CSU Project Rebound, 2021). The disparity may be due to the resilience formerly incarcerated students employ to overcome obstacles associated with a criminal record coupled with other support systems. These support systems include various campus assistance programs and CSU reentry initiatives like PR.

PR employs various types of employees to effect change, including social workers. The duties of PR social workers are multifaceted and focus on service delivery. The strategic plan mentioned previously lists several service objectives, like mentorship from those with lived experiences, on and off-campus outreach, and conducting college assessments (Project Rebound Consortium, 2019). These and other PR goals and objectives are admirable at face value; however, non-Project Rebound evaluative data is scarce. Although the program's continuance points towards effective program outcomes, more research on participant experiences may help improve service delivery.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to add to the body of work related to Project Rebound by qualitatively exploring participant perceptions of the program. Outside of program-generated statistical data, evaluations of Project Rebound are in short supply. As for direct beneficiaries, little publicly identifiable, empirical information highlights the program's efficacy from the participant's standpoint. The inclusion of input from criminal justice system impacted alumni will help determine whether current PR data and evaluations are congruent with subjective experiences.

PR's fundamental mission is successful societal reintegration and higher education support (CSU Project Rebound, 2021; Project Rebound Consortium, 2019). Some specific interventions PR administers are responses to all letters of inquiry from incarcerated people, help in navigating the university admissions process, the provision of direct support to acquire school supplies and textbooks, the encouragement in and reward of student community service, and the support of a PR alumni association (Project Rebound Consortium, 2019). Although these and other mission objectives are admirable, clarity on the degree to which services are offered and accessed, precisely how these interventions enhance individuals' lives, and how recipients view the program will strengthen program policy.

This study employed qualitative, exploratory research to clarify PR's role in participants' lives. As mentioned, statistical data paints the program consistently positive (Project Rebound Consortium, 2019). Although participation in PR may promote only positive outcomes, the likelihood of that scenario seems small. Instead, PR may be a positive factor, a negative presence, a combination of the two, or may not affect academic performance and post-college success. This study posited that semi-structured participant interviews would shed light on a topic otherwise obscured in a wealth of quantitative data.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

From a systems perspective, this study benefits social work practice in the following ways. First, on a macro level, this study has significance in driving public policy to bolster communities. Given the high numbers of persons reentering society from prison, effective initiatives designed to lessen the negative impact of returning individuals help reassure policymakers of sound, fiscally responsible interventions. Second, regardless of whether assumptions made by participants and conclusions are positive, negative, or both, policymakers need empirical evaluations to propose new or rectify existing programs. Accordingly, this study may reinforce CSUSB PR's worthiness, support the program's continuance, and justify increased funding to optimize outcomes. Finally, the preceding aligns with the National Association of Social Workers' ethical principle of *Social Justice* by strengthening communities through effective reentry initiatives (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017).

Social work may benefit from this study on micro and mezzo levels by gaining knowledge regarding the perceived efficacy of peer support and other individualized interventions from beneficiaries' perspectives. In line with the NASW principles of *Dignity and Worth of the Person* and *Importance of Human Relationships* (NASW, 2017), utilizing qualitative, direct input from the targets of a reentry program is vital. A research design focusing on human perceptions rather than numerical representations regarding effect empowers the subjects

through inclusion. Additionally, social work practice generally benefits from qualitative data using an ecological theoretical perspective by highlighting the effects of a formerly incarcerated college reentry program on the individual.

Since literature exists that casts a shadow on the claimed worth of college degrees, the field of social work must evaluate PR and other reentry initiatives to determine costs versus benefits (Strohush & Wanner, 2015). Additionally, this study adds to the body of work related to Project Rebound outcomes by exploring the following question: How do Project Rebound participants perceive the program's impact on their lives?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study examined how Project Rebound (PR) participants perceived the program's impact on their lives. Since PR has existed at only 13 of 14 California State University (CSU) campuses since 2016, literature on the topic is limited (California State Fullerton, 2020). Accordingly, this literature review is organized into the following categories to broaden the conversation: research addressing formerly incarcerated (FI) student reentry challenges, reentry interventions, and Project Rebound specifically.

Reentry Challenges

For decades, California has engaged in mass incarceration, culminating in approximately 173,000 in 2006 (Harris et al., 2019; Legislative, 2019). Although this data is disheartening, good news is on the horizon. Mandated by federal courts, the state is reforming questionable corrections habits through various resentencing initiatives (Krisberg, 2016). However, the number of individuals interned in the carceral system is still high, with 125,472 in state facilities in 2019 (California Department of Corrections, 2020). Even after prison population reductions, the need to develop and employ interventions designed to help FI people overcome reentry challenges is salient.

Financial

Upon release, FI people must find ways to break the cycle of poverty leading to recidivism. One way criminal justice system-impacted people overcome financial barriers to success is through higher education (Strayhorn et al., 2013). R. Kim et al. (2013) note that prisoners who earned a college degree stay crime-free in the community longer than their matched comparison group. The researchers conclude that prison-based college programs positively reduce recidivism even when correcting for selection bias (R. Kim et al., 2013). However, students who did not earn a degree during incarceration must pay for post-release college courses and non-tuition-related costs, which low income hinders (Ross, 2019).

Prospective FI students must find ways to finance their studies. Fortunately for individuals seeking post-carcer education, the federal government and non-profit agencies have put a premium on 21st-century education attainment by offering financial assistance (U. S. Department of Education, 2006, 2009). Unfortunately, two non-material areas of weakness recently released individuals must face not diminished by financial aid are stigma and compromised soft skills (Copenhaver et al., 2007; Hughes et al., 2002; LeBel, 2012; Mukamal et al., 2015; Ross, 2009; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

Stigma

Successful reentry depends on how individuals adapt to inherent and external perceptions regarding their FI status. For example, the label "ex-con"

often has deleterious effects on how one perceives themselves, affecting interactions within the environment (Copenhaver et al., 2007). Labeling is a sociological concept that describes the internalizing of denigrating designations resulting in harmful, self-fulfilling realities (Becker, 1963). The resulting stigma stemming from carceral experiences and the ex-convict label has far-reaching implications for the societal reintegration of released people (LeBel, 2012; Tietjen et al., 2020).

Goffman (1963), a pioneer of the concept, conceptualizes stigma as a discrediting state and notes the societal perceptions of stigmatized individuals as being less than human. Being the case, the perceptual barriers FI individuals must overcome are daunting. Ross et al. (2019) indicate that FI students must overcome the fear other students have towards them and that liberal professors may have trepidation of having ex-cons as students. Resultingly, to leverage the lived experience FI people bring to classroom discussions, the larger campus community, and society, the effects of stigmatization and labeling must be countered (Becker, 1963; LeBel, 2012; Ross, 2019).

Stigma is persistent but can be mitigated through transformative campus experiences. Using participatory action research (PAR) to highlight the positive effects of college on FI students, Halkovic et al. (2013) reveal the collateral consequences of a criminal history on self-worth. The study used PAR to elevate student voices and concluded that many deleterious effects of stigma are

countered when students interact with others like themselves and engage in campus life (Halkovic et al., 2013).

Soft Skills

One way to offset the adverse effects of stigma is the development of interpersonal and other social abilities, often referred to as soft skills. Heckman & Kautz (2012) define soft skills as personality traits, preferences, and motivators valued socially and academically. Of note is that measures like achievement tests, IQ. scores, and grades do not predict life success to the degree of soft skills (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Therefore, nurturing traits such as effective communication, self-confidence, and persistence in individuals lacking those qualities bolster reentry success (Mukamal et al., 2015). Thus, expanding college opportunities for FI individuals through reentry interventions increases individual success by building socially desirable attributes.

Reentry Interventions

Mentoring

As previously discussed, FI individuals are disadvantaged economically and socially. Due to these barriers, advanced education is a path some take to offset reentry difficulties and improve harsh socioeconomic realities. However, system impacted students often lack vital social and academic skills, which hinders scholastic success. One approach that counters these barriers is mentoring (Fuentes et al., 2014; B. Kim et al., 2015; Tewksbury & Ross, 2017; Tietjen et al., 2020).

Mentoring FI students is an intervention that helps offset external and inherent shortcomings. According to Tietjen et al. (2020), mentoring is an approach often lauded and employed by Convict Criminology (CC) proponents. CC consists of faculty, researchers, and students with and without carceral experience who mentor students, among other academic and social pursuits (Richards, 2013).

The literature on academic mentoring is vast and presents positive conclusions; however, more studies regarding mentoring and the FI are needed (Fuentes et al., 2014; Tewksbury & Ross, 2017). Judging from CC's emphasis on mentoring and the growth of FI reentry programs valuing the practice, partnering seasoned professionals with FI students seems logical. Of interest is the involvement of a CC pioneer, John Irwin, in creating one of the first system-impacted people reentry programs, Project Rebound (Richards, 2013; Tietjen et al., 2020).

Reentry Programs

Each individual who overcomes barriers to reintegration decreases recidivism, and reentry programs help promote this idea. In California, many non-profit and governmental organizations offer services to ex-offenders. This study focuses on academic-based reentry projects since education, particularly college level, raises the quality of life for degree holders (Torpey, 2018).

Of import is the critical appraisal of reentry initiatives by some scholars. One meta-analysis and review of reentry program efficacy was conducted by

Berghuis (2018). The analysis included studies that fit criteria, including recidivism rates, as the primary barometer of successful reentry. The review revealed a statistically nonsignificant effect for rearrest regarding program effectiveness (Berghuis, 2018). The researcher admits that the results of their review lack encouragement but that reentry programs can reduce recidivism.

Another critical reentry program perspective expresses doubt regarding the intentions of these initiatives and those who work in the field (Kelly, 2010). The researcher is a formerly incarcerated person who gives a firsthand account of their experience with reentry programs and an appraisal of these projects. Although the author uses a conceptual rather than strictly empirical approach, the article includes theoretical perspectives like critical criminology to support claims. In addition, the author indicates how reentry helped them in some activities of daily living while critically appraising reentry staff motivations (Kelly, 2010).

Kelly's and other critiques praise reentry programs while pointing out policy shortcomings, raising doubts about service-driven intervention efficacy. However, some programs seem to promote FI individuals' success. For example, one reentry program, Project Rebound, attempts to bolster societal reintegration by using a multifaceted approach (Mukamal et al., 2015).

Project Rebound

Literature on Project Rebound is limited. One source comes from Anderson et al. (2019) and gives a comprehensive program overview. The authors note that PR is a reentry program helping FI people through the school

enrollment process and assisting them in actualizing postsecondary degrees (Anderson et al., 2019). The program of study is located in a county with an above-average poverty and incarceration rate. In addition, the campus's location lacks social opportunities and has high crime levels, aligning with this study's focus on marginalized system-impacted populations.

Anderson et al.'s (2019) work concludes that CSUSB's Project Rebound is worthwhile in participants' minds. The study notes that all but one program participant returned to old behaviors and that PR promotes positive outcomes (Anderson et al., 2019). In addition, the author's study used retention, graduation, and services to gauge program success and noted the active involvement of students, 100 percent graduation attainment, and high retention rates as signs of PR viability (Anderson et al., 2019).

As evidenced, literature addressing Project Rebound exists but is limited. In the 52 years of the program's existence, one would suppose that more analyses could benefit program participants and social worker interventions. Additionally, further scholarly work assessing interventions commonly used by program staff can benefit the field of social work. This study adds to the academic body of work on PR, powering further analyses to help drive policies dependent on research data.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

This study used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (systems theory) as a theoretical framework. The theory views child development as

influenced by external, environmental forces in addition to maternal and familial components (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Guy-Evans, 2020; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013). Systems theory rejects the laboratory approach to research in favor of considering the interplay between variables, including environmental influences (Guy-Evans, 2020). Although initially developed to explore childhood developmental stages, this study used the model to frame analyses of PR program participants' viewpoints. Specifically, the impact of program interventions on participants within each systems level, e.g., micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronos, was critiqued through program members' cognitive lenses.

The literature has not thoroughly appraised the theoretical quality of Bronfenbrenner's theory yet. However, Joseph and Macgowan's (2019) Theory Evaluation Scale (TES) has been used in the social work literature as a transdisciplinary measure for theory analysis (Drew et al., 2021; Joseph, 2020a; Joseph, 2020b; Joseph, 2021; Joseph et al., 2022; Stoeffler & Joseph, 2020). Additionally, a small number of social work researchers have appraised some variants of the ecological systems theory using the TES. Among them are Contreras (2019), Koehler and Parrell (2020), Navarro (2019), and Ramirez and Rodriguez (2019), all of whom found the overall quality of systems theory excellent.

Under the TES, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is strong in coherence, conceptual clarity, philosophical assumptions, historical evolution, usefulness for practice, scope of competence, and human agency. However, this

theory has shortcomings in empirical evidence and testability (Contreras, 2019; Koehler & Parrell, 2020; Navarro, 2019; Ramirez & Rodriguez, 2019). These limitations, though, should not overshadow the overall robustness of systems theory. Considering its focus on different systems that impact individuals' lives, Bronfenbrenner's model is relevant to this study. That is, systems theory's tenets are consistent with the purpose of this research.

Summary

Literature addressing the issue of formerly incarcerated people and their struggles with societal reintegration is abundant. However, qualitative studies on university-level reentry initiatives, specifically Project Rebound (PR), are sparse. This chapter reviewed literature tangential to reentry programs and Project Rebound (PR) to broaden the conversation and address fundamental barriers to reentry success. Additionally, this chapter reviewed available literature on PR and highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of this study's guiding theory.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study aimed to determine how Project Rebound (PR) participants perceived the program's impact on their lives. Resultingly, this chapter contains details of how the study was employed. Six sections clarify the study design, sampling method, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis. Following those sections is a summary revealing how the application of research methods exposes PR's perceived value in participants' lives.

Study Design

This study elucidated PR participants' perceptions of the program through qualitative, exploratory research. Also known as the interpretive approach, qualitative research often captures subjective reality, unlike exclusively objective, quantitative methods (Grinnell Jr. & Unrau, 2018; Labra et al., 2019). By doing so, qualitative designs allow researchers to, as in this case, explore the ideas, opinions, and perceptions of individuals in ways that empower the respondent and give a more detailed view than numbers-based analyses (Labra et al., 2019). The reason subjective PR participant perceptions were vital for this study and social work was the voice given to marginalized populations and a clearer picture

of the value and shortcomings of a program designed to benefit them. Thus, this study explored how PR members felt about various methods employed by program staff to enhance their lives. Additionally, this study gathered data from semi-structured interviews, which were scrutinized using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method that effectively reveals patterns from qualitative data in ways quantitative approaches lack.

Methodological strengths of the design lay in qualitative data. As indicated, information gained through qualitative research is rich in information. The approach allows research respondents to participate in a study by answering open questions that quantitative designs can not replicate. However, qualitative research has limitations. First, this study was time-consuming. For example, conducting and analyzing the interviews was labor-intensive. Second, qualitative designs are more expensive than quantitative methods. The amount of time expended on the research process may have translated into monetary expenses that surveys could have sidestepped. Finally, although results are rich in detail, they can not be generalized like quantitative designs with large samples.

Sampling

This study used non-probability, purposive sampling of past PR participants from an undisclosed university. The study's researcher obtained a list of PR alumni willing to participate in the study. From that list, the researcher contacted as many former PR participants as time allowed to obtain a sample, not exceeding twenty individuals, generating meaningful data. This sampling

method was purposeful in that the researcher attempted to draw from the list individuals representing a diverse racial and gender cross-section. Although an ideal sample would include the preceding, the small number of formerly incarcerated individuals who accessed higher education, graduated while utilizing PR services from a specific university, and were willing to act as respondents revealed a potential study limitation. In fact, FI individuals generally constitute a hard-to-reach population (Abrams & Franke, 2013; Bello et al., 2021; Binda et al., 2020). The preceding point resulted in a limited (N=7) sample size.

Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured questions from an interview guide further discussed in the procedures section of this chapter. The information collected centered on PR participants' perceptions of the impact specific program interventions had on their lives and how they felt about the program. Some of the types of questions this study presented to respondents were: 1) Can you tell me about the services you received from PR; 2) Of all of the services you received, which one(s) impacted your life the most; and 3) How can PR improve services moving forward? The preceding questions elicited rich, expressive data where qualitative research excels. The researcher additionally collected demographic variables (see Appendix A).

The guide developed for this study was student researcher-generated. Therefore, the questions listed in the guide were pretested on experienced investigators to diminish researcher bias, ensure clarity, and establish or reaffirm

content and face validity. Additionally, face and content validity derived from researcher-lived experience, through research instructor input, and from the expertise of the research supervisor. However, the possibility of social desirability bias stemming from the personal nature of interviews posed a possible data collection limitation.

Procedures

The researcher collected data in the following sequence. First, the PR director and researcher determined the best pool of potential respondents by selecting for diverse demographic characteristics. The possibility that the actual sample did not reflect an ideal swath of demographic traits due to the lack of availability existed. Second, the researcher contacted by phone or email potential respondents to secure participation and set up interview meeting times. The meetings were held via the Zoom conference application. Utilizing Zoom rather than in-person interviews stemmed from Covid 19 health protocols. In addition, the researcher thoroughly covered informed consent with the respondent, including the study's purpose, the right to ask questions, the right to discontinue participation, and the right to confidentiality, and verbally obtained permission to proceed. The researcher emphasized that real names would not be published and are coded during data analysis. Third, the researcher questioned respondents using the interview guide. The guide included fourteen open and close-ended questions worded in ways ensuring confidentiality, respect, and respondent autonomy to elicit unbiased responses. The interview questions

incorporated culturally competent language that considered the potential trauma associated with pre and post-carceral experiences.

Fourth, the researcher thanked each respondent for their time and effort and reassured them that their confidentiality would be respected. Finally, the collected data was transcribed using the Zoom application transcription feature and researcher labor by analyzing the information using thematic analysis. The proceeding events occurred during February 2022.

Protection of Human Subjects

The various ways that human subjects were protected for this study follow. First, no personally identifiable information that could be used to deduce the respondent's identity was collected and stored. Second, all PR location references were non-specific. Third, all names were formatted as pseudonyms and coded. Fourth, the video interview, interview transcripts, and written informed consent were stored using sensitive information codes, with the key secured on a university hard drive (see Appendix B). Fifth, each respondent was informed that the study was not anonymous since the interviewer met each person. However, the respondent's confidentiality would be adhered to, and the gathered information kept on the above-mentioned hard drive. Sixth, all teleconferencing application encryption and security features were utilized during interviews. Finally, all respondent information collected in the study was handled following HIPAA guidelines.

Data Analysis

Before the analysis, the researcher transcribed the collected data using the Zoom teleconferencing transcription feature. In the words of Bailey (2008), transcription—conversion of speech to text—is the first step in the data analysis sequence. Then, the researcher transferred the text to a word document for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an inductive data analysis approach (Labra et al., 2019) that provides greater flexibility in terms of theory, sample size, and data collection (Clarke & Braun, 2017). According to Labra et al. (2019), thematic analysis consists of the following six steps: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and presenting and discussing results.

Using this procedure, the researcher identified the initial codes then grouped them into categories and more prominent themes. In addition, collecting data from participants regarding the effects of PR on their lives elicited themes depicting the program in various ways. In other words, this study utilized thematic analysis to explore, organize, and present information to reveal patterns among participant responses regarding their perceptions of PR. Meanwhile, collected demographic data were used for descriptive purposes only.

Summary

This study was not a PR evaluative tool. Instead, due to themes that emerged from analyses of participant interviews, judgments of the worth of various PR interventions arose. Those judgments, or evaluations, were beneficial

but did not constitute the sole purpose of this study. The underlying reason for this study was to give voice to an underrepresented and marginalized group whose members desire to better their lives, families, and communities. One way to accomplish the aforementioned was to explore how PR participants feel about a program designed to enhance their rehabilitative endeavors.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Frequency Distributions

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study sample. Six divisions represent standard analytical features used to describe individuals in qualitative research. First, for gender, the sample contained all males. Next, the sample's racial makeup is split evenly between black and white participants, with close to half being Hispanic. The third category was education, with all respondents reporting master's level academic degrees. The next demographic is work status, with the overwhelming majority of respondents indicating full-time work status and a single individual reporting part-time employment. The penultimate category—marital status—reveals most respondents as married or in a relationship, with a minority single. Finally, the annual income of most participants is \$50,000 or more, with a lone, moderately low-income report of between \$10,000 and \$19,999.

Table 1

Sample Demographics (N = 7)

Variables	N	%
Sex/Gender		
Male	7	100
Female	0	0.00

Race/Ethnicity		
Black	2	28.57
Hispanic	3	42.86
White	2	28.57
Education		
MA	7	100
Work Status		
Not Working-Seeking	1	14.29
Working-Full Time	6	85.71
Marital Status		
Single	2	28.57
Married/In a Relationship	5	71.43
Annual Income		
\$10,000-\$19,999	1	14.29
\$50,000 or above	6	85.71

Findings

This study sought to answer the question: How do Project Rebound (PR) participants perceive the program's impact on their lives? Thematic analysis of interview responses revealed four significant concepts. These concepts were identified when most respondents indicated similar views on the same topic. Table 2 highlights the following four primary themes that arose from data analyses: 1) PR alumni have positive views of the program, 2) PR alumni's views of the program reflect services and materials received, 3) PR provides a variety of services that prove vital to alumni success, and 4) PR has room for improvement. Each of these themes is described in Table 2.

Table 2

Study Primary Themes

Theme	Description
1	Project Rebound alumni have positive views of the program.
2	Project Rebound alumni's program views reflect material services received.
3	Project Rebound provides varied services that prove vital to alumni success.
4	Project Rebound has room for improvement.

Project Rebound Alumni have Positive Views of the Program

The researcher asked respondents to detail how PR impacted their lives for this theme. Various questions elicited primarily positive responses that indicate the beneficial effects of PR services. Resultingly, participants reported complimentary views of the program in total. Below is a sample of responses highlighting participants' affirmative feelings of PR:

Respondent 1: I would give it a 10 [out of 10] because I was able to actually, um, just have a space where I can talk about my incarceration with other folks who've experienced the same thing. So, right there is what was really impactful about the program.

Respondent 2: I think it [PR] was very effective. Like, it allowed me to just understand that I wasn't alone in my education; my higher learning, uh,

battle. It helped me to understand that everything, the motions I was going through wasn't for not.

Respondent 4: You know that they [PR] helped in ways man that they just came through. So, for those first two years when I was commuting from Pasadena...to get gas cards like sometimes that would just allow me to do things, like maybe with my daughter, like I could use \$100 from Project Rebound and use the other \$100 to do something like with my son or with my daughter, you know I mean?

Project Rebound Alumni's Program Views Reflect Material Services Received

This theme derived from interview response patterns indicating positive attitudes as dependent on accessed material services. Most respondents revealed that receipt of material goods reduced barriers to educational success. Material services are those interventions that provide tangible items like gas, food, and gift cards rather than mentoring or peer support. Below is a sample of responses reflecting the preceding:

Respondent 2: I received help with book(s), um, gas vouchers, food vouchers, um...access to on-campus resources like the writing center. They, like, literally held events where they provided food, like, you know, like banquets, um, and graduation certificates from the assembly [San Bernardino city council].

Respondent 4: At the top of the list is, you know, when the semester first starts...they help you with the supplies. You know, so they were helping to

buy the books and then sometimes there might be money left over to buy the other stuff that you need, you know what I mean? At the beginning of the semester it's the supplies...that you don't have to come out of your pocket with.

Respondent 5: So, for those first two years when I was commuting from pasadena...to get gas cards like sometimes that would just allow me to do things, like with my maybe with my daughter, like I could use \$100 from Project Rebound and use the other \$100 to do something like with my son or with my daughter, you know I mean?

Project Rebound Provides Varied Services that Prove Vital to Alumni Success

Project Rebound offers services—or interventions—that address needs beyond material goods. For instance, a core benefit PR affords participants is mentoring. Another form of assistance is moral support stemming from interactions with those sharing lived experiences. During the interviews, respondents indicated that the variety of PR services elevated their chances of successful reintegration, as noted below.

Respondent 1: It [Project Rebound] is still impacting my life. Um, I mean the last job that I had, you know, just having that on my resume and saying I'm formerly incarcerated...was actually what landed me the job, you know, opening up about my incarceration and, you know, telling the interviewer. So, being part of this program is what landed me the job. So, what Rebound has done is kind of made it comfortable for me to open up

about those experiences and not be so ashamed, like I used to be, because there used to be a lot of shame, a lot of guilt and anxiety; imposter syndrome. So, it's [incarceration] a traumatic experience, you know, and I'm still going to therapy for it. So, I think, uh, Rebound was able to kind of ease that transition.

Respondent 2 : I'll say the mentorship. Um, I was really appreciative for people who have went through the process already and were able to point me in the right direction to, um, help my journey, like, that made it a lot more easy... it just showed that, uh, there's jobs, that I'm unemployable, that the emotions that I'm going through; it's not the end of the world.

There's already people that have overcame the direction that I was living in. So, as long as I do my part, then doors will open because they've opened like for other individuals. So, just seeing other people that have already been there, done that, it just was a great motivating factor.

Respondent 6: That [staff access] was a service that I got. She [staff] was an open, um, you know, caring, genuine person and that, to me, far surpassed any other thing that was ever given to me in the program. It was just them, you know, being available.

Project Rebound Has Room for Improvement

As noted, respondent views of PR were primarily positive. However, feedback revealed that the program could improve existing services and develop new ones to further the initiative's effectiveness. All study participants shared detailed opinions on ways PR can improve moving forward, as indicated by the following interview responses:

Respondent 3: Well, yeah, the job, you know, helping people get the job after getting a degree, you know? I think that's one of the things that Project Rebound needs to kind of focus on after education, you know? But not necessarily career development because, you know, getting your degree prepares you for your career, but they [PR] need to be more out in the general public to try to eradicate the bias that people have towards us.

Respondent 6: Project Rebound should offer more money because when you're a student you need money for everything, you know, just to even eat and survive, but, yeah, that's it. I think another service that Project Rebound could probably offer is like a workshop for certificates of rehabilitation because I want people to know about that. I spoke to many people from Project Rebound and not one of them knew what a certificate of rehabilitation was.

Respondent 7: Project Rebound needs more networking within the community to see who hires system impacted people for future job placement for graduates, not for current students but for graduates, right?

Because, you know, we get to a point where, okay, I'm gonna get my degree, but can that degree be translated into a job appointment because of my criminal history? Of course, we know the answer is yes. But, I think it would behoove us to have strategic partners within companies in communities as a lead for our graduates to go and fill out resumes or applications.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study highlighted various ways a University of California reentry program impacted participants' lives. Revealing Project Rebound (PR) strengths and weaknesses through alumni experiences accomplished the study's goal while simultaneously accomplishing two objectives. First, program participants articulated in their language how interventions affected them. Thus, allowing service recipients of a marginalized population to express themselves about targeted interventions, which promoted personal and social autonomy. Second, PR benefits by gaining firsthand input of program efficacy for possible improvements.

Since qualitative research specific to PR is limited, this study is essential and warrants increased scrutiny of campus-based reentry programs designed for FI students. This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design to interview, via semi-structured manoeuvres, seven former PR participants (N = 7). Four significant themes indicate that PR alumni consistently expressed favorable program views, saw material-based services as most beneficial, noted their PR experiences elevated personal success, and proposed possible avenues for improvement.

Consistency with Previous Research

This study's findings tracked with the limited amount of prior research. Anderson et al. (2019) found that all but one respondent indicated tangible items, such as books and supplies, are PR's greatest strength. Theme three of the current study revealed a similar reaction by PR alumni. Respondents consistently reported material goods like textbook assistance, food and gas cards, and other money-based supports as the most impactful PR services.

Another theme reflecting similar research was that reentry support increases FI student success. For instance, Strayhorn et al. (2013) found that research respondents list supportive networks as vital in college adjustment and personal progress. Since PR, on the whole, is a supportive network that encourages intra-program participant networking, theme four of this study is congruent with Strayhorn et al.'s. (2013) work. Additionally, Anderson et al. (2019) and Halkovic et al. (2013) indicate that transformative encounters from reentry program participation—such as those experienced from positive student interactions and staff mentoring—were essential for societal reintegration. Theme four of this study indicates that PR provides services essential to alumni success, reflecting findings from the previously mentioned research.

Only one qualitative research study specifically addressed PR, as previously mentioned. Anderson et al. (2019) and this study looked at PR participants' perceptions, albeit from different viewpoints, to reveal potential program improvements. An example is the issue of program space. This study

notes respondents' concern for limited PR office space, as does Anderson et al.'s (2019). Another area of suggested improvements revealed in both studies is increased intra-program networking.

Implication of the Findings for Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy

Theory

This study carries significant implications for theory, research, practice, and policy. In terms of theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (systems theory) posits that various environmental systems largely influence childhood development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). These external arrangements include the microsystem (individual), mesosystem (peer, school), ecosystem (community), macrosystem (society), and chronosystem (major life events). The fundamental idea behind the theory is that, apart from physiologically-based psychological mechanisms, childhood development is primarily affected by different levels of environmental forces multi-directionally (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Guy-Evans, 2020). For instance, a systems theory perspective would consider how adolescent behaviors affect and are influenced by immediate, mesosystem peer group dynamics. Like other approaches where the environment plays a crucial role in childhood development, systems theory can be broadened and applied throughout the life course to understand developmental phenomena.

Different conclusions emerge combining a systems perspective with this study's emergent themes (Table 2). From a microsystems viewpoint, themes three and four demonstrate that program services enhance individual wellbeing.

For instance, when PR participants receive tangible goods, like gas and food cards, they can spend money on other things, like self-care activities. The psychological benefits derived from having fun or simply relaxing likely promote positive outcomes, such as enhanced coursework or antisocial desistance. Theme four supports the latter claim, which indicates that PR services are critical to student success.

A deeper look at theme one reveals the utility and need for more networking from a mesosystems perspective. One service component most respondents believed PR fell short on was linkage with other program participants. Responses indicate that peer group encouragement, backing, and moral assistance are desirous and reduce stigma, imposter phenomenon, and increase unity through shared experience.

Increasing the sense of community is an exosystem-related influence themes one and two highlight. Specifically, theme one revealed respondents' overall positive view of PR. Throughout this study's analysis, a consistent meta-theme—particularly with theme one—is the value of shared, lived experience.

The macrosystem relates to, among other things, societal influences. All study themes and general responses reveal how PR, through service recipients, positively impacts society and how that system drives service necessities. A good example is respondent reports of criminal activity desistance with no criminal justice recidivism. This phenomenon is consistent with the literature, and although no quantifiable causal relationship is established in this study, a

reasonable inference is that reentry program involvement positively impacts participant success (Anderson et al., 2019; Halkovic et al., 2013; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

Finally, chronosystems experiences associate throughout this study's themes and interview responses. For example, imprisonment is an understandably impactful experience in anyone's life. For those attempting to salvage hopes and dreams lost to criminal justice system involvement, programs like PR raise the probability of life success and help mitigate deleterious effects from carceral trauma. Particularly evidenced by themes one, four, and demographic responses indicating non-single statuses, the significant life event of transitioning from prison to productive societal member with meaningful interpersonal involvements is salient. The preceding proves a win-win for individuals and society by promoting prosocial attitudes and cultural productivity.

Research

This research differs from previous studies by focusing solely on respondent voices to demonstrate the effectiveness of Project Rebound. Although some research incorporated interviews, this study used participant voices as the sole arbiter of FI students' experience to praise and critique a program designed to facilitate productive societal reintegration. As a result, the findings in this study fill a gap in the literature on PR. In addition, by assessing the program's impact on participants, these findings represent a template for future research on the effectiveness of PR initiatives.

Practice

Social work practice primarily focuses on six ethical principles of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2017). Of those principles, *Social Justice, Dignity and Worth of the Person, and Importance of Human Relationships* are most salient to this study. As evidenced by the preceding section, this study focused on those three and other ideals to support, strengthen, and critique PR by relying on and valuing alumni input.

Specifically, interview responses contextualize program-driven social work practice. By doing so, specific interventions are continued or modified for desired outcomes. For instance, one strategy expressed in the strategic plan mentioned in chapter one is professional and peer mentoring (Project Rebound Consortium, 2019). This study revealed that mentoring is something PR lacked. Accordingly, program administrators can hire more peer support, authorize training, or direct staff to increase mentoring activity.

The wider campus community benefits from this study by utilizing findings to educate administrators, faculty, and students about the usefulness of having FI individuals on-campus. Administrators' fears of allowing a reentry program on campus are reduced when presented with qualitative data indicating recipient success. Similarly, exaggerated concerns of classroom safety and management decrease. In the case of students, many of whom have family members negatively impacted by the criminal justice system, individuals can feel pride in knowing success happens, thus, being influenced to enter the field.

Policy

In short, policy is government activity addressing the peoples' needs. In the case of Project Rebound, California promotes a program designed to alleviate the deleterious effects of incarceration on individuals and society through the public university system. Specifically, the CSU system has seen fit since 1969 to allow PR a campus presence. In 2016, CSU administrators authorized PR to expand and operate as a consortium that provides services on 14 campuses (California State Fullerton, 2020). This study strengthens the likelihood of PR's continuance and possible enlargement due to the positive feedback of respondents. Additionally, a successful expansion of PR may signal to other university systems and governments the utility of reentry programs in strengthening individuals, families, communities, and society.

Limitations

This study provided meaningful insight into PR alumni views of the program, but some limitations exist. First, the small sample size ($N = 7$) restricts a diversity of input, possibly resulting in positively skewed program views. This researcher was unable to correct for the preceding limitation due to the reclusive, hard-to-reach nature of the study population. Second, the study focused on one PR at a single campus setting. This limitation was unavoidable due to the PR coalition's autonomous nature. Each program operates independently, making system-wide research challenging. However, breaching strict protocols and

gaining access to just one program was an achievement and a good start for independent research.

Another study limitation was the lack of diversity. Intersecting with the other shortcomings, this one was also unavoidable. Convenience sampling dictates that researchers utilize available resources, including respondent participation. In the case of FI individuals, the overwhelming majority are men, lessening the likelihood of a gender-diverse respondent pool. Of note is that this researcher realizes that the inclusion of female voices could have significantly changed results.

Finally, and related to all previously mentioned limitations, is the lack of generalizability. The concept of generalizability is essential in research, and qualitative designs are notably deficient in this area. Policy or practice change recommendations diminish when results are limited to just the study participants with restricted applicability to the broader population. Conversely, the upside to qualitative research is the detail participants provide and the benefits they might incur.

Recommendations

Future research can address the limitations raised in this study by taking various actions. First, recruiting a larger participant pool to gather a wider variety of responses may improve generalizability and enhance the representativeness of the study population. Second, expanding studies to multiple locations may reveal campus-specific cultural differences and geographically-based population

needs. Finally, the inclusion of diverse voices, particularly women, improves confidence in research equity and may reveal gender-specific viewpoints. Similar to the second recommendation, incorporating women's unique experiences into the research may help target various intersectional needs of formerly incarcerated students.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide individuals directly affected by the overzealous use of carceral deterrence a chance to express themselves. The data demonstrate that marginalized groups take the brunt of current criminal justice policies. Unfortunately, the aftermath of incarceration is apparent, whether one sees mere policy-related correlations or distinct causal effects. Formerly incarcerated (FI) individuals, primarily poor people of color, return from prison more disadvantaged than when interred. The excellent news is that society's awakening consciousness regarding prison reform spurs increasing program formulation to reduce reentry difficulties.

However, even though their hearts may be in the right place, professionals, including politicians, convict criminologists, and social workers, end up having more input in programs designed to alleviate recidivism than intervention recipients. The current research hopes to empower FI people to elicit cathartic release. Of note is the unanimously positive post-interview presentations of respondents. Continued research like this may trigger cascading

effects throughout all systems leading to enhanced participant psychology, interpersonal relationships, and societal reintegration.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographics

1. Please state your sex/gender: _____
2. Please state your race/ethnicity: _____
3. What age range are you: a) under 25 b) 25-34 c) 35-49 d) 50 and over
4. What is your highest educational degree: _____
5. What is your work status: a) working full-time b) working part-time
c) not working/not seeking d) not working/but seeking
6. What is your marital status: a) single b) married/in a relationship
c) separated d) divorced e) widowed f) other, please specify
7. What is your annual income range: a) less than \$10,000 b) \$10,000-\$19,999
c) \$20,000-\$29,999 d) \$30,000-\$39,999
e) \$40,000-\$49,999 f) \$50,000 or more

Interview Questions

1. How did you find out about PR?
2. On a scale of 0-10, with 0 the lowest and 10 the highest, how would you rate the impact of PR on your life? _____ Why this score?
3. Can you tell me about the services you received from PR?
4. Which one(s) impacted your life the most of the services you received?
5. Which services, if any, do you wish you were offered? How would that service have improved your life?
6. Overall, how do you feel about the effectiveness of PR?
7. How can PR improve services moving forward?

Developed by M. Johnson

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

The study you are asked to participate in is designed to gain detailed knowledge of Project Rebound (PR) alumni's perceptions of the program. Graduate student Martin A. Johnson is conducting the study under the supervision of Dr. Rigaud Joseph, a professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: This study aims to gain insight into how PR affects program participants from their viewpoints. The fundamental purpose of this study is to give voice to you, a person formerly incarcerated, regarding a program designed to lessen your status's negative impact and strengthen reentry programs overall.

DESCRIPTION: You will be asked to interview via the ZOOM teleconference application. The interview will cover roughly ten questions regarding how you feel PR has impacted your life.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION & RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you are free to refuse participation or withdraw at any time. Your decision to withdraw will not result in any adverse action.

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT: All responses will be collected remotely and transcribed by the researchers. Although you may choose to disclose identifying information during the interview, your name will not be connected to your responses. No PR staff names or PR locations will be published. All information gained from this research will be kept confidential. No one besides the researchers will have access to the data. Additionally, all research data will be stored in compliance with applicable laws and university regulations. The results from this study may be submitted for professional research presentations, university applications, and scientific journal publications.

DURATION: The remote interview should take no longer than 45 minutes between January 15th and February 28th, 2022.

RISK & BENEFITS: Although there are no direct research or participant benefits, there may be long-term advantages for reentry programs, Project Rebound, and the field of social work. Additionally, respondents are empowered by giving voice to an initiative designed to impact their lives positively.

QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS: If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Rigaud Joseph at (909) 537-5507.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library Scholar Works database: <http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/> at California State University, San Bernardino, after July 2022.



I agree to be recorded via teleconferencing software: _____ YES _____ NO

By typing X in the space below, you acknowledge that you have been informed and understand the nature and purpose of this study. You acknowledge that you are at least 18 years of age and freely consent to participate.

This is to certify that I have read the above and am 18 years or older: _____

APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



November 12, 2021

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2022-19

Rigaud Joseph and Martin Johnson
CSUSB - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
[San Bernardino, California 92407](https://www.csusb.edu)

Dear Rigaud Joseph and Martin Johnson:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF PROJECT REBOUND: A QUALITATIVE STUDY" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's [COVID-19 Prevention Plan](#) for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse

IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study. Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.

Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research. Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-19 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie. Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,
Nicole Dabbs
Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board
ND/MG

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