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Exploring the Effectiveness of a Life-Skills Program in a Florida Prison Through a Social Bond and General Strain Theory Perspective

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Examining the Effectiveness of a Life-Skills Program in a Florida Prison Through a Social Bond and General Strain Theory Perspective

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .......................................................................................................................... iii

List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... iv

Abstract ..................................................................................................................................... v

Chapter One: Introduction ....................................................................................................... 1

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review .............................................. 5
  Criminological Theory and Prison Programming .............................................................. 6
  Social Bond Theory ............................................................................................................. 6
  Life-Course Theory ............................................................................................................. 7
  General Strain Theory ......................................................................................................... 8
  Effects of Prison Programming ........................................................................................... 12
  Institutional Behavior .......................................................................................................... 12
  Social Support ................................................................................................................... 16
  Readiness for Reentry ......................................................................................................... 19

Chapter Three: Current Study and Methodology .................................................................. 23
  The LIFERS Program ......................................................................................................... 23
  Data Collection .................................................................................................................. 30
    Sample Recruitment ........................................................................................................ 30
    Interview Protocol .......................................................................................................... 33
    Qualitative Analysis ....................................................................................................... 34
    Quantitative Data and Analysis ...................................................................................... 34

Chapter Four: Results ........................................................................................................... 37
  Institutional Misconduct ...................................................................................................... 37
    Relationship between Incarcerated Men and Correctional Officers ......................... 42
    Personal Motivation and Hope ....................................................................................... 44
    LIFERS Program Facilitators ......................................................................................... 45
  Social Support ................................................................................................................... 47
    Social Support from those in Prison ............................................................................. 49
    Prison Programming and Levels of Social Support ....................................................... 50
  Readiness for Reentry ....................................................................................................... 53
    Reentry and “Being under the Thumb” ....................................................................... 57

Chapter Five: Discussion ...................................................................................................... 60
  Limitations ......................................................................................................................... 65
  Policy Implications ............................................................................................................. 67
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Treatment and Control Group Demographic Comparisons ........................................32

Table 2: Pooled OLS Regression Analyses for Disciplinary Reports ........................................39

Table 3: Pooled OLS Regression Analyses for Visitations .........................................................49

Table 4A: List of Study Participants ..........................................................................................95
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Average Number of Disciplinary Reports for Study Participants from 2001-2021 ...... 38

Figure 2: Average Number of Visitors for Study Participants from 2001-2021 ......................... 48
ABSTRACT

Prison programs have existed for decades; however, recent attention towards prison reform has raised awareness of the importance of correctional education. Research has shown that many of these programs are highly effective for incarcerated individuals in that program participation is likely to decrease recidivism and increase post-release employment success. Using in-depth interviews with 40 currently incarcerated men – 20 of whom participated in a 2-year prison program (the LIFERS program) and 20 who did not – and matched institutional records for visitation and disciplinary infractions, this study expands on the current research by assessing additional measures of program efficacy, including institutional misconduct, social support, and readiness for reentry. Although institutional records did not reveal many significant differences between the two groups in terms of the number of disciplinary infractions and visits, LIFERS program graduates described having significant levels of social support from others inside and outside of prison, and believed they are more prepared to reenter society. This study may inform policy regarding the importance of implementing and maintaining access to programming for all incarcerated individuals, as well as increasing the number and improving the quality (e.g., increasing funds, prison educators) of the programs offered. It may also have significant implications towards reducing the barriers for program involvement. Lastly, this study adds to the growing literature on the potential importance of prison programming as it relates to institutional behavior and individual attitudes.
CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

There are just over 1.4 million individuals currently serving time in a state or federal prison (Minton et al., 2021). Of those, roughly 600,000 individuals are sent home each year – some after serving decades behind bars. Prison programming is one tool often used by state and federal corrections departments to improve the reintegration success of formerly incarcerated individuals. However, support for prison programming often fluctuates. In 1974, for instance, Robert Martinson concluded that “nothing works” in terms of prisoner rehabilitation, ultimately leading to a reduction in funding for prison programming. Despite reduced funding and shifting support, “the primary goal of some prison programs is to ease [an incarcerated individual’s] transition back into the community and to lessen the likelihood of reoffending by targeting and addressing criminogenic needs while incarcerated” (Pompoco et al., 2017, p. 517).

While a variety of different programs are offered in prisons, educational programming has been one of the most utilized types of programming available to incarcerated individuals since the 1930s (Lawrence et al., 2002). However, due to the sheer number of incarcerated individuals, budgetary concerns, and the influence of the “tough-on-crime” philosophy, educational programs are often the first to be removed from institutions (Lahm, 2009; Pratt, 2009). This is often despite evidence that participation in academic and vocational programs may significantly reduce the chances of recidivism (Aos et al., 2006; Davis et al. 2013; MacKenzie, 2006; Wilson et al., 2000), as well as have positive outcomes post release (Andrews et al., 1990; Cullen, 2013; Lipsey et al.,
2007; Sperber et al., 2013). One Control group participant, Adam\(^1\), who served 26 years, was acutely aware of how a tough-on-crime approach is not always the best method and would often lead individuals to leave prison without any change or growth.

I think that in the early late or late 80s, maybe early 90s, they had this “get tough on crime” and so they started locking men up and throwing away the key trying to, you know, their classic theme was, you know, deter violence. I don’t see where it’s deterred anything, you know. I see men coming to prison and leaving as they always did.

Further, there have been numerous policy and legislative changes made throughout the years that have altered the educational programs offered to incarcerated individuals (Reed, 2015). Originally, the Higher Education Act of 1965 allowed incarcerated individuals to receive Pell Grants to help pay for college tuition while incarcerated. However, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 made changes to the Higher Education Act, which ended access to post-secondary education (PSE) classes for many incarcerated individuals (Tewksbury & Taylor, 1996). Reed (2015, p. 538) stated how “the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 restricted participation in the Grants to States for Workplace and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Individuals Program to those meeting the following criteria: age 35 or younger; scheduled release or parole date within 7 years; and no convictions for criminal offenses against minors, sexually violent crimes, or murder.” These changes have essentially eliminated access to educational programming for many individuals. Although long-term incarcerated individuals may spend the majority of their lives incarcerated, there is always a possibility that they could be released either after completing their maximum sentence, due to changes in sentencing laws, or via parole for those who are parole-eligible (Leigey & Ryder, 2015). Therefore, prisons should be preparing and educating all incarcerated individuals despite the length of their sentence.

\(^1\) I have replaced all participant names with pseudonyms throughout my thesis to protect their confidentiality.
Much of the research on the benefits of prison programming has focused primarily on reducing recidivism, limiting our understanding of the potential impact of prison education on more immediate changes like institutional behavior, levels of social support, and readiness for reentry (Castro et al., 2015; Courtney, 2019). Prison programs have the potential to create a safer environment for incarcerated individuals (Pompoco et al., 2017), as well as prison staff, by leading to more prosocial relationships and improved behavior. It is also possible that these institutional and individual improvements might vary by type of prison program. As such, this study begins to fill this gap by assessing the efficacy of the Learning to Improve the Future by Exercising Responsible Strategies (LIFERS) program offered in a Florida state prison. Using in-depth interviews with 40 currently incarcerated men as well as institutional records, I explore whether participation in this particular program differentially affects institutional behavior, levels of social support, and readiness for reentry compared to non-participation.

This study has the potential to inform policymakers of the importance of correctional education for incarcerated individuals. Specifically, increasing and improving the quality of the programs offered in prison as programs are not designed to keep individuals busy, but to allow them an opportunity to learn and improve their chances of being successful if they are to ever be released. Additionally, this study investigates whether prison programming reduces institutional misconduct and encourages positive relationships with correctional staff and prison educators; thus, increasing one’s feelings of social support.

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2 For clarification, the LIFERS program, contrary to a popularly held belief, is available to all incarcerated individuals and is not restricted to those with a life sentence. The LIFERS program is simply an acronym that stands for Learning to Improve the Future by Exercising Responsible Strategies. Therefore, incarcerated persons with and without life sentences participate in the LIFERS program.
In what follows, I will first detail the benefits of educational programming in prisons using social bond, life-course, and general strain theories as my guiding theoretical frameworks. I will then describe the history of the LIFERS program after which I will provide a detailed overview of my methodology, including my sample, data collection methods, and the data analysis plan. Next, I will address both the quantitative and qualitative results from my study with a final section on potential policy implications, limitations of my study, and avenues for future research.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The type of programs offered in state and federal prisons varies from educational classes like adult basic education (ABE), general educational development (GED) test preparation, and post-secondary education (PSE) to vocational training, or career and technical education (CTE), to life skills courses. The different programs offered in correctional institutions are often tailored to fit the needs of incarcerated individuals. For example, ABE classes are for incarcerated individuals with very low-level literacy and math skills, GED classes are for incarcerated individuals who have not yet earned a high school diploma, and CTE classes are for incarcerated individuals who seek training in specific trades such as construction, plumbing, and welding (Reed, 2015). PSE classes are for incarcerated individuals who are interesting in earning an associate degree or beyond (Reed, 2015).

These programs are crucial to incarcerated individuals. Shippen and colleagues (2010) described how incarcerated individuals in adult correctional facilities have, on average, seventh grade reading scores. Specifically, Tewksbury and Stengel (2006) found more than half (e.g., 60%) of all incarcerated individuals had not completed high school. These educational deficits amongst incarcerated populations must be addressed as prior studies have demonstrated a relationship between lower educational attainment with both increased criminal offending (Chappell, 2004; Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Blomberg et al., 2011) and institutional misconduct (Gendreau et al., 1997; Wooldredge, 1998; Huebner, 2003).
The LIFERS program at Sumter Correctional Institution (CI) is a program that offers life skills courses. Specifically, life skills programs aim to "address such skill deficiencies that may hinder the attempts of offenders to function successfully in everyday life" (MacKenzie, 2008, p. 9). Cecil and colleagues (2000) explained the key components that life skills programs offer, such as training in financial literacy, parenting, conflict resolution, and job search skills – similar to the classes offered in the LIFERS program at Sumter CI. Research has shown that providing incarcerated individuals with life skills can be beneficial (Walters, 2005; Golden et al., 2006; Tong & Farrington, 2006; Lowenkamp et al., 2009). For example, Tong and Farrington’s (2006) meta-analysis that examined 16 evaluations of the Reasoning and Rehabilitation program, a life skills program that provides incarcerated persons with social skills in group settings with approximately 6-12 participants, found a 14% reduction in recidivism for program participants who received the intervention in an institutional setting.

Criminological Theory and Prison Programming

Social Bond Theory

In Hirschi’s (1969) seminal work, *Causes of Delinquency*, he describes how people are naturally hedonistic and motivated to commit crime. However, Hirschi (1969) explains that individuals who feel more “bonded” to conventional society may attempt to refrain from engaging in deviant or delinquent behavior. In other words, the costs associated with criminal behavior are too high, so it is not in the individual’s self-interest to engage in the behavior. Thus, strong and high-quality social bonds inhibit one’s propensity to offend, whereas weak social bonds increase one’s propensity (Peterson et al., 2016). Specifically, Hirschi (1969) explains how social bonding consists of four elements: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, all of which can be found in three different social institutions: family, peers, and school.
Incarcerated individuals, then, who are involved in programming may feel more adequately socialized and more strongly bonded to the program and others, as they engage with other program-oriented individuals. Program volunteers and staff, for instance, also become a form of social support for incarcerated individuals. Grosholz and colleagues (2020) describes how social support from in-prison networks (e.g., other incarcerated individuals, volunteers, correctional staff, etc.) and out-of-prison networks (e.g., family, friends) can improve both institutional misconduct and post-release outcomes. In fact, prison programming touches on all four elements associated with Hirschi’s (1969) social bonding theory. Program participants may feel attached to the outside individuals involved with the program, as well as to their peers in the program, they may feel committed to the program to achieve their goals, they are involved in conventional activities (e.g., reading, studying, facilitating, etc.), and they have a belief in their self-betterment. For example, individuals that are committed to school may stay “away from deviant behavior because they do not want to jeopardize their educational goals” (Peterson et al., 2016, p. 1340). Involvement in school, such as prison programming, may also keep individuals occupied, therefore decreasing their opportunity to engage in delinquency (Peterson et al., 2016).

**Life-Course Theory**

When incarcerated individuals become involved in prison programming, it can also lead to changes within the self that can lead to a reduction in institutional misconduct and can lead to future desistance from crime (Grosholz et al., 2020; Szifris et al., 2018). Within Sampson and Laub’s (1993) life-course perspective, which stems from Hirschi’s (1969) social bonding theory, they explain why offenders may desist from crime as they age. They concluded that there are three adult social bonds, known as “turning points,” or “hooks for change” per Giordano and colleagues (2002), that can take place in one’s life that may lead them to desist from crime – quality marriage,
quality employment and military service, with the emphasis on marriage and employment. They argue that individuals who experience these “turning points” are more likely to desist from crime (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Receiving education or participating in prison programming while incarcerated may serve as a “hook for change” or “turning point” for incarcerated individuals (Shover & Thompson, 1992; Ford & Schroeder, 2010; Grosholz et al., 2020; Szifris et al., 2018). Participating in the LIFERS program may be a “turning point” as education can be viewed as a prosocial bond, and may increase one’s stake in conformity, such that program participants may believe that continuing to offend becomes too costly, thus shying away from engaging in crime or misconduct in order to remain in the program (Grosholz et al., 2020). Providing educational programs can allow incarcerated individuals the opportunity to learn and develop new skills, which can allow them to find meaning and purpose in their life as one individual stated, “even in jail, you have purpose, but you got to define it” (Leigey & Ryder, 2015, p. 737). Thus, it is important that while incarcerated, individuals have access to educational and vocational programs. This will help them stay busy and be committed and attached to prosocial others and institutions; thereby, improving their incarceration experience and reentry success.

*General Strain Theory*

Further, prison programming may provide incarcerated individuals with positively valued stimuli, which may reduce their overall strain (Blevins et al., 2010). Agnew’s (1992) general strain theory describes three forms of strain an individual can experience: failure to achieve positively valued goals, removal of positively valued stimuli, and the presence of negatively valued stimuli. Individuals who are incarcerated may experience all three forms of strain as they may not be able to achieve their goals while in prison, they are pulled away from family and friends, as well as
access to employment, and may face victimization from other incarcerated individuals and correctional officers (Agnew, 1992). Though, when individuals are exposed to strain, crime is only one possible response (Agnew, 1992).

Prison programming may affect these three forms of strain. To illustrate, Blevins et al. (2010) describes how incarcerated individuals have specific goals while serving their time, including obtaining privileges such as work/housing assignments, early release, canteen items, and visitation. When incarcerated individuals participate in prison programming, it is likely that they will obtain one or more of these privileges. In addition, prison programming can influence parole decisions, therefore, “participation in prison programs could directly translate into a positively valued goal, given its impact on parole decisions or privileges within the institution” (Blevins et al., 2010, p. 150).

The prison environment inevitably presents incarcerated individuals with noxious stimuli; however, participants of prison programming may be exposed to less of these negative stimuli when they are presented with privileges, specifically housing assignments. Prisons are difficult environments to live in. They are loud, the space is crowded, and living conditions are harsh. Incarcerated individuals face strict institutional rules and schedules and may experience high levels of potential victimization (Blevins et al., 2010). When program participants are housed separately from the general population, they may experience a decline in delinquency and criminal behavior as they are surrounded by like-minded individuals. Blevins and colleagues (2010, p. 152; Agnew, 2001) describe how incarcerated individuals who are exposed to noxious stimuli may attempt to “escape, terminate, or alleviate it, seek revenge against its source, or use illicit drugs to manage its impact.” By limiting one’s exposure to the noxious stimuli through policies like separate housing
for program participants, they are less likely to experience strain and, therefore, potentially less likely to engage in misconduct.

Moreover, incarcerated individuals are affected by strains or stressors from the moment they enter the criminal justice system. While it is believed that punishment has shifted to become more humane, Sykes (1958) and other scholars have described how the pains of imprisonment (i.e., strains and stressors) can be just as painful to an incarcerated individual’s psyche as corporal punishment once was to the body. Sykes (1958) recognized five pains of imprisonment: the deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security. Not only do incarcerated individuals experience these pains of imprisonment, but they are also experiencing pain from the loss of contact with outside relationships. In line with the deprivation model originally put forth by Sykes (1958) to explain prison adaptation, their personal freedoms have been taken away as they are no longer free citizens, they no longer have control, and have little say in day-to-day activities (Goodstein et al., 1984). Incarcerated individuals are also restricted in their contact with outside family and friends as they are required to abide by strict visitation and phone policies.

Depriving incarcerated individuals of such things is likely to lead to negative outcomes inside the prison as individuals attempt to alleviate the strain they are experiencing as well as the negative emotions that ensue. When incarcerated individuals participate in prison programming, they can develop positive relationships with other incarcerated individuals, correctional staff, and educators/facilitators of the program that may help alleviate some of the strains or stressors they are facing. It is important that prisons provide access to prison programming, as “denying programs and services can induce strain through its impact on the achievement of positively valued goals” (Blevins et al., 2010, p. 151). When incarcerated individuals are faced with strain, one of
the responses may be crime. For example, individuals may choose to join criminal groups (e.g., gangs) to help deal with pains of imprisonment while also gaining protection from victimization (Blevins et al., 2010). Unfortunately, once an individual chooses to be involved in the gang lifestyle, they then experience a weakening of social bonds (Agnew & White, 1992) and increase in antisocial attitudes (Gendreau et al., 1997), which may lead to an increase in institutional misconduct.

However, social support may affect whether incarcerated individuals respond to strain conventionally or deviantly. For instance, research has shown that incarcerated individuals who have higher levels of support were less likely to offend, even when experiencing strains and stressors (Colvin et al., 2002; Ellis & Savage, 2009; Robbers, 2004), whereas those with lower levels of social support were more likely to cope with strains by engaging in misconduct (Blevins et al., 2010).

In a study by Leigey and Ryder (2015), they interviewed 25 life-without-parole (LWOP) incarcerated individuals who had served at least 15 years and were at least 50 years of age. They found five strains as being the most serious for this population, including missing little luxuries, missing social life, missing somebody, feeling that your life is being wasted, and wishing you had more privacy (Leigey & Ryder, 2015). Interestingly, individuals felt that the losses they have experienced from their removal from society have been more painful than the losses associated in prison (Leigey & Ryder, 2015).

Various theoretical frameworks are able to demonstrate how correctional programming may improve one’s incarceration experience by improving social bonds (Hirschi, 1969), serving as a turning point in one’s life trajectory (Sampson & Laub, 1993), and reducing strain (Agnew, 1992; Blevins et al., 2010). Using these theoretical frameworks as a guidepost, this study seeks to
understand how a particular prison program – the LIFERS program – may affect institutional misconduct, social support, and overall expectations for reentry. In the rest of this chapter, I explore how these three variables – institutional behavior, social support, and readiness for reentry – may be influenced by prison programming. Incarcerated individuals who are involved in programming may have decreased levels of misconduct, and increased levels of social support and feelings of readiness for reentry.

Effects of Prison Programming

Institutional Behavior

While research has shown that participation in prison programming decreases recidivism, there is less research exploring the relationship between prison programming and institutional behavior (Lahm, 2009; Clark & Rydberg, 2016). In general, research finds that participation in educational programs in prison reduces misconduct compared to nonparticipation (Courtney, 2019; Lahm, 2009; Lawrence et al., 2010; Pompoco et al., 2017). More specifically, Courtney (2019) examined the relationship between prison education programs and misconduct among males incarcerated within the Arizona state system. He found that “there was a statistically significant greater reduction of misconduct for inmates who participated in prison education…than those who did not participate” (Courtney, 2019, p. 55), thus, highlighting the benefits of prison education. Exploring the effects of institutional misconduct is crucial and a main concern for correctional staff as disciplinary infractions can lead to heightened costs for medical care, litigation, and heightened security measures (Tewskbury et al., 2014).

Research has also shown that correctional educational programs reduce the number of disciplinary infractions and improve post-release outcomes (Saylor & Gaes, 1992; Lahm, 2009; Lugo et al., 2019; Courtney, 2019). Specifically, Saylor and Gaes (1992) followed a sample of
7,000 federal incarcerated individuals for a 12-month period comparing vocational participants versus a matched control group of non-vocational participants. They found that vocational participants not only received fewer pre-release rule infractions, but they were also “more likely to be employed after release, more likely to have a successful stay in a halfway house, and less likely to have their parole revoked” (Lahm, 2009, p. 41). In a more recent study done by Pompoco and colleagues in 2017, they found that incarcerated individuals who had completed a college class had a 9% \((p < 0.1)\) decrease in their overall rates of violent misconduct compared to incarcerated individuals who had not been a participant in any other programs. In addition, another study examining the relationship between institutional misconduct across four different types of programs – GED, high school, vocational education, and college – in 30 prisons across Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee concluded that college programs were the most beneficial, as incarcerated individuals who partook in these classes received fewer disciplinary infractions than participants of the other aforementioned programs (Lahm, 2009).

Moreover, age plays a role in this relationship as the relationship between age and prison misconduct has been consistent across research (Camp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Sorensen, 2007). In addition, a plethora of research has shown that as incarcerated individuals age, they are less likely to be involved in criminal activities or violent behavior (Zamble & Porporino 1988; Camp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Sorensen, 2007; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2008). Being involved in prison programs, despite age, can decrease overall misconduct levels. Blowers and Blevins (2015) found that younger incarcerated individuals who did not take part in prison programming were more likely to commit a major violation. Therefore, although older incarcerated individuals may “age out” of crime, participating in prison programming may also encourage desistance from crime and institutional misconduct.
Furthermore, there are differences between incarcerated individuals who complete a program versus those who do not. To demonstrate, Latessa and colleagues (2015) examined the impact of educational programming on institutional misconduct for male and female incarcerated individuals housed in Ohio correctional institutions. Within this study, Latessa and colleagues (2015) explored different program types, such as college (PSE) and general education programs, while also observing varying participation levels, such as starters and completers of programs. They concluded that both male and female incarcerated individuals who participated in the college programs were less likely to engage in misconduct compared to those who did not participate, although participants who completed the program experienced further reductions. Completion of a program may be an accurate predictor of success for both incarcerated individuals who remain in custody and for those who are released. As suggested by Stephens (1992), those who complete a program may be more motivated to change.

Moreover, due to transfers, solitary confinement, and early release, correctional educational programs are affected by high rates of attrition (Messemer & Valentine, 2004). Due to these reasons, it is very common for participants to have only partial completion of a program (Reed, 2015). Incarcerated individuals of course may drop out on their own because they may have very different reasons for participating in educational programs. For example, Runell (2015) described how some incarcerated individuals simply join a program to interact with friends, conduct criminal activities, or just to leave their cells. Those incarcerated individuals who joined programs for these reasons would engage in “jailing,” a term used to describe when one jokes or disrupts (Runell, 2015). Research has revealed that many program participants who are there to learn would like to find a way to separate out those who attend programming with ulterior motives (Moeller et al., 2004).
Despite the plethora of research showing the benefits of prison programming, it may also have a negative impact on some incarcerated individuals. The learning environment may be stressful for some to learn in, and others may not feel like the classes are challenging enough, which could lead to disinterest and, therefore, make it more difficult to be successful (Runell, 2015). Participating in prison programming may also lead to unintended negative effects, such that misconduct levels may increase (Clark & Rydberg, 2016; Adams et al., 1994). Clark and Rydberg (2016, p. 338) explained how this increase in misconduct “may be a function of a surveillance effect in which their participation or completion of the programs results in being written up for misconduct that is related to the program.” To demonstrate, a program participant may be written up for not attending class or being tardy, whereas a non-program participant does not have these concerns (Adams et al., 1994). In addition to the surveillance effect, there may be other factors that explain these negative effects of prison programming. For example, being enrolled in a prison program gives the incarcerated individuals access to more items that could be brandished into a weapon of sorts and more places on the compound that would otherwise be restricted if not a program participant, thus giving program participants more of an opportunity to get in trouble (Lahm, 2009).

Further, academic and vocational programs exhibit a dose-response curve as brief periods of involvement have little or no effect on one’s misconduct (Adams et al., 1994). Adams and colleagues (1994) examined dose effect in a cohort of 14,441 incarcerated individuals in the Windham school district who were admitted and released from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice-Institutional Division (TDCJ-ID). They found that “with each 100-hour increase in program participation, the rate of minor and major rule violations increased” (Adams et al., 1994,
Ultimately, more research is needed to assess the impact of prison programming on an incarcerated person’s behavior, as the research that has been done has produced mixed results.

**Social Support**

Participation in prison programming not only affects institutional behavior, but it can also become a source of positive social support and contribute to post-release success (Blevins et al., 2010; Leigey & Ryder, 2015; Vacca, 2004). Social support is often defined as support that has been derived from interpersonal relationships, such as relationships with staff and other incarcerated individuals and visits from family (Vuolo & Kruttschnitt, 2008; Cochran, 2012; Day et al., 2015; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019). Many of those who are incarcerated may lack prosocial friendships and/or relationships with individuals on the outside. Prison educators, then, often fill this void and give incarcerated individuals a sense of connection and hope (Michals & Kessler, 2015; Wright, 2004). These positive connections and feelings of hope are invaluable in counteracting the traditional prison norms and rampant hostility that often exist behind the prison walls (Wright, 2004). Additionally, prison education can encourage social bonds with other incarcerated individuals and staff (Blevins et al., 2010). Leigey and Ryder (2015) described how forming these relationships with other individuals in programs may allow some individuals to find purpose in their life.

In addition, over time, incarcerated individuals express how their outside support has diminished over time due to the difficulties associated with prison (Leigey & Ryder, 2015). To illustrate, family members have gotten older and passed away, many are at the age where it is difficult to travel, phone calls and traveling are expensive, etc. As such, prison educators and volunteers end up being a form of social support for incarcerated individuals. Kallman (2020) described how incarcerated individuals have limited access to both families and social support
systems, no professional or occupational identity, and very sparse mental health services; therefore, teachers become a positive form of social support who are there to listen and will take them seriously.

Also, prison classrooms are highly beneficial for incarcerated students as many acquire a love for learning, which is often the first time in many incarcerated individuals’ lives (Kallman, 2020). Incarcerated individuals who participate in educational/vocational programs may also develop deep levels of trust and connection while in the classroom as the learning environment has both high levels of peer-to-peer support and respect (Kallman, 2020). Clark and Rydberg (2016) described how incarcerated individuals may also become more prosocial (Chappell, 2004); the educational environment encourages social support, as well as allows for social bonds with other incarcerated individuals and correctional staff to be established (Blevins et al., 2010). Day et al. (2015) described how social support and procedural justice may help alleviate misconduct and institutionalized resistance.

Furthermore, positive relationships with staff and other incarcerated individuals may help individuals with the adjustment process (Beijersbergen et al., 2015; Steiner & Wooldredge, 2018; Vuolo & Kruttschnitt, 2008). In fact, prior research has found that incarcerated individuals who perceive officers as more procedurally just (e.g., defined as treating others with fairness and respect, Tyler, 1990) have a lower likelihood of engaging in certain rule violations (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2018). Incarcerated individuals who have unsatisfactory interactions with correctional staff may experience more adverse effects trying to adjust to prison, as oftentimes, correctional staff is used to help navigate the prison life, particularly for those who have served less time (Vuolo & Kruttschnitt, 2008).
Additionally, when incarcerated individuals have favorable relationships with other incarcerated individuals, they may experience less mental health problems (Butler, 2019) because this form of social support can help alleviate the frustrations and anxieties that are associated with life in prison (Colvin et al., 2002). Incarcerated individuals who are involved in prison programming may engage in activities that allows them to develop deeper connections (e.g., friendships) with other program-oriented individuals. For example, the Walls to Bridges program, an Inside-Out program, incorporates a circle of pedagogy, which involves all individuals sharing their own truth and personal testimony (Graveline, 1998; Palmer, 2004). This type of personal sharing in programs allows individuals to feel interconnected amongst one another; it also allows their voices to be humanized and respected, which can be life-affirming for incarcerated individuals (Fayter, 2016; Freitas et al., 2014; Pollack, 2016).

Receiving visits is highly beneficial for incarcerated individuals. Individuals are able to voice their frustrations and concerns in terms of the treatment in prisons (Cochran & Mears, 2013; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019), as well as decrease the adverse experiences of prison life (Butler, 2019). To illustrate, visits from family may help to alleviate the stress of being in the prison environment with complete loss of freedom (Sykes, 1958; Cochran & Mears, 2013). Program-oriented individuals may also experience this reduction of stress from being around program volunteers and staff; for a period of time, the individuals feel removed from the chaotic and controlling prison environment and feel as if they are able to engage in a “dialogic sphere of civility,” as they feel included and accepted (Wright & Gehring, 2008, p. 323). Additionally, receiving visits may decrease feelings of anxiety and frustration, which can lead to a lower likelihood of one experiencing mental health problems (Butler, 2019). Similarly, a plethora of research has shown that frequent contacts with family and friends (i.e., receiving visits and having
someone to call, email, and/or write letters to) are associated with a decrease in overall misconduct levels (Cochran, 2012; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; Jiang & Winfree, 2006; Siennick et al., 2013; Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2012; Wooldredge, 1994). Similarly, the frequent presence of seeing outside program volunteers and prison educators and being able to share one’s thoughts and feelings provides program-oriented individuals with a sense of relief.

Michals and Kessler (2015) explained how prison educators fulfill a unique role, such that they are different from correctional staff and family, by serving as a professional and being able to have more in-depth conversations that may influence public opinion of the importance of PSE. As stated by Mcaleese and Kilty (2020, p. 278), “volunteers and educators act as mediators between the performative space of the classroom and the carceral logic and day-to-day correctional practices that structure prison spaces.” Volunteers and educators are critical for incarcerated individuals as they provide not only a deep level of support for incarcerated individuals, but also are a voice for these individuals “whose voices, stories, and experiences are often lost in mainstream narratives about crime and punishment” (Mcaleese and Kilty, 2020, p. 278).

**Readiness for Reentry**

There are many benefits from participating in prison education programs. Correctional education may reduce recidivism and improve the employment opportunities for individuals being released (Aos et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2013). When incarcerated individuals leave prison, they face many challenges upon release, such as barriers to employment, housing, finances, and transportation (Bushway et al., 2007; Makarios et al., 2010). However, when incarcerated individuals get involved in prison programs, it may help to decrease the impact of these barriers, allowing individuals to successfully reintegrate back into society (Makarios et al., 2010).
Participation in a prison program may also serve as an identity change for some incarcerated individuals. Just as prison education can serve as a “hook for change” (Giordano et al., 2002), it can also help to foster new identities for some individuals (Szifris et al., 2018). Bozick and colleagues (2018) explained how earning an educational degree can help incarcerated individuals alter their identity and self-concept, which can encourage individuals to lead better lives and refrain from engaging in subsequent crime. For decades, education programs offered in prisons have been able to remind incarcerated individuals not only of their humanity, but also of their potential (Bonanfanti, 1992; Fayter, 2016; Kilty & Lehalle, 2018; Kilty et al., 2020). Interestingly, Giordano and colleagues (2002) found that Sampson and Laub’s (1993) “turning points” will likely only lead to desistance from crime if identity changes take place as well, thus demonstrating how important educational attainment may be for individuals both while incarcerated and when released.

Further, educational programs may reduce stigma, including self-stigma, which can increase positive post-release outcomes (Evans et al., 2017). For instance, once an individual completes and earns an educational degree, they may then be able to add this degree to their resume, improving one’s chances of passing basic screening challenges to be hired post release (Bozick et al., 2018). Educational programs acknowledge cognitive changes while also providing incarcerated individuals with an increased set of occupation-specific skills that may expand one’s job pool (Bozick et al., 2018). Additionally, evidence has shown that cognitive transformations are vital to encourage desistance (Maruna, 2001; Vaughn, 2007; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; King, 2013; Paternoster et al., 2016; Rocque et al., 2016).

Moreover, self-efficacy may be developed through the academic learning process (Zajacova et al., 2005; Pelletier & Evans, 2019). Bandura (1977, p. 191) defined self-efficacy as
behavioral changes from “cognitive events [that] are induced and altered most readily by experience of mastery arising from effective performance.” When incarcerated individuals engage in prison programming, self-confidence and positive self-image begins to grow, and this self-perception of mastery gives them an opportunity to establish prosocial relationships that may be beneficial when reintegrating back into society (Pelletier & Evans, 2019). Specifically, a quantitative study exploring the self-efficacy amongst students who were incarcerated and those who were not incarcerated (an “inside-outside” model) demonstrated an increase in self-efficacy only for students who were incarcerated (Allred et al., 2013). Ultimately, individuals who complete an educational and/or a vocational program prior to being released from prison feel more confident to experience the barriers to reentry with social support present because they feel as if they are now able to contribute to society and make prosocial decisions (Pelletier & Evans, 2019).

In addition, completing an educational or vocational program may serve as a desistance “signal” (Bushway & Apel, 2012), as it may signal that an individual is ready for gainful employment. For example, signaling theory, a labor economics perspective, describes the importance of completing a program (Spence, 1973), such that participants who complete a program may represent a ‘signal’ that they are different from non-completers or non-participants (Lugo et al., 2019). Specifically, program completers may signal a desistance from crime as it can be assumed that non-completers or non-participants may have felt that the “costs” associated with joining and finishing a program were too high (Lugo et al., 2019). Being enrolled in a correctional program takes an immense amount of effort, and some individuals would rather allot this time and effort into engaging in further criminal activities.

Overall, there are many benefits associated with completing a prison program. Specifically, incarcerated individuals involved in prison programming may experience an increase in social
support (Leigey & Ryder, 2015; Grosholz et al., 2020) that may affect their behavior while incarcerated and post-release (Lahm, 2009; Blevins et al., 2010; Bozick et al., 2018; Courtney, 2019), as well as improve their feelings of being prepared for reentry (Evans et al., 2017; Pelletier & Evans, 2019). Those who complete a program (e.g., often referred to as graduates) may not only experience a cognitive transformation in their thinking, but may also endure an identity shift, such that they feel more hope and purpose in their life and are motivated to become a better version of themselves.

Prison programming in and of itself may serve as a “turning point” in one’s incarceration trajectory. The skills acquired, as well as the cognitive and identity shifts that may occur, may increase one’s success while incarcerated and if they were to be released. Program educators, staff, volunteers, etc. become a form of social support for incarcerated individuals, and these strong social bonds that are formed over time may encourage individuals to refrain from engaging in institutional misconduct. Further, the entire prison experience is filled with immense amounts of strain, being pulled away from family and friends and the total loss of autonomy creates many stressors that can cause an individual to further digress while incarcerated. Programs offered in prison, specifically the LIFERS program, a life-skills program, may decrease these strains and stressors by allowing individuals to achieve their goals (e.g., earning an education, learning/improving their reading, and writing abilities, etc.) and increasing their exposure to positive stimuli (e.g., prison educators, volunteers, etc.), while decreasing the presence of negative stimuli by being surrounded by program-oriented individuals.
CHAPTER THREE:
CURRENT STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I provide a detailed overview of the history of the LIFERS program, the program studied in this thesis. I also outline the study sample and how I recruited and selected participants, as well as explain the interview protocol and the data collection and data analysis process. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the quantitative analyses that I completed in addition to the qualitative analysis.

The LIFERS Program

The overall goal of the LIFERS Program is to change the way an individual thinks to decrease the chances of recidivism while also improving his well-being while serving his sentence. The program offers 14 self-betterment classes, such as the following: Analyzing Your Emotions, Criminal Rationalization, Fundaments of Communications, Parole Planning/Transitional Housing, Life Skills, Parenting for Change, Victim Impact, Domestic Violence, Marriage and Family, Anger Management, Social Reintegration, and Road to Somewhere (Phase I, II, and III). These classes are facilitated by well-trained incarcerated individuals who have several years of experience. These facilitators serve under the guidance of the program directors.

The LIFERS program at Sumter Correctional Institution was founded in 1992 by a group of incarcerated individuals who wanted to utilize their incarceration time to help others. They proposed their idea to Captain James A. Shultz, and the result was “The Captain J.A. Shultz Memorial LIFERS Group.” The LIFERS program was first known as the “Tailfins” because
almost all the original members had been incarcerated for so many years that cars still had tailfins when they were driving (Kori, 2013).

Originally, the LIFERS program was operated as a club led by incarcerated individuals who were serving life sentences. Classes were held on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings in the visiting park, and consisted of anything an incarcerated individual was capable of teaching, such as the following: origami, chess, different languages (e.g., ASL, Spanish, English), product rationalization, commercial driver’s license (CDL) classes, and unofficial GED classes that allowed individuals to prepare prior to being sent to education to take their official GED test (Kori, 2003). By 2008, the LIFERS program was so well-known around the correctional institution that the visiting park would be occupied by approximately 400 incarcerated individuals taking the courses that were being offered.

The LIFERS program has both inside and outside sponsors who support the group. The first outside sponsor for the LIFERS program was Karen Montgomery and her husband, John Potts, both of whom offered continuing support for the group. Mrs. Montgomery assisted the first LIFERS program members in how to facilitate the basic life skills classes. Her focus was on changing participants thinking and behavior, from criminality to responsibility. Once Captain Shultz retired, the new inside sponsor became Captain G.A. Merritt. As would be expected due to the nature of the DOC, staff positions change frequently, and staff are often transferred to other facilities. Without internal sponsors for the LIFERS program, the program would not be able to exist. Fortunately, in 2009, the LIFERS program received a new institutional sponsor, Lieutenant (Lt.) K. Gilbert, along with two new civilian directors, Edward and Carolyn Kori. Mr. and Mrs. Kori had a new, yet similar, objective for the LIFERS program. Their goal was to change
participant’s behavior by changing their thought process. The LIFERS program motto had now become – “think it, feel it, say it, do it, become it” – as it remains today (Kori, 2013).

The current directors of the program, Edward and Carolyn Kori, began volunteering for Kairos Prison Ministry International, Inc. (Kairos) in various institutions in 2000 (e.g., Hardee CI, Zephyrhills CI, Hernando CI, etc.). Kairos is an interdenominational Christian ministry that allows men and women to volunteer inside of the prison to give incarcerated individuals a weekend experience sharing Christ’s love and forgiveness (Kairos Prison Ministry, n.d.). Volunteering for Kairos allowed Edward and Carolyn Kori to find their calling and they later began volunteering at Sumter Correctional Institution in 2009. Edward Kori is a veteran of the U.S. Army and served 20 years as a reserve officer with the Tampa Police Department, where he later was appointed Lieutenant. He has a master’s degree in criminology from the University of South Florida and was later recognized as a “Distinguished Alumni.” Carolyn Kori has a double master’s degree in mental health counseling and vocational rehabilitation from the University of South Florida. Carolyn Kori was a nurse, supervisor, and mental health counselor in the Veterans Affairs Administration for 30 years. With the degrees held by the Koris, in 2010, the LIFERS program was officially established and acknowledged by the parole commission in Tallahassee, Florida. To this day, the Koris remain the directors of the LIFERS program.

With the help of the Koris, the LIFERS program shifted in 2009 to become a more structured program through the implementation of a standardized curriculum. With the assistance of outside sponsors who hold degrees in various fields (e.g., law enforcement, education, health services, government service, business, and ministry) and with the help of the Pre-Release Orientation Program (P.R.O.P.), a nonprofit organization, the LIFERS program began to operate as an official program. The program was able to establish relationships with the Florida
Department of Corrections (FDC), The University of South Florida (USF), and the Florida Commission on Offender Review (FCOR). Fortunately, all expenses for the LIFERS Program are covered through private donations from various benefactors. Forming these partnerships has given the LIFERS program exceptional credibility, as FCOR would recommend selected incarcerated individuals for placement in the LIFERS program (Kori, 2013).

In 2017, however, FCOR stopped recommending incarcerated individuals to the LIFERS program due to miscommunication that the LIFERS program had been discontinued. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the LIFERS program continued to be facilitated by inmate instructors and was the first program to allow its directors and volunteers back in the institution. Unfortunately, the program has still yet to receive incarcerated individuals who have been sent by FCOR. I attended an Offender on Commission Review meeting in Tallahassee, Florida in October of 2021, and asked the parole commissioners why they are not sending incarcerated individuals to the LIFERS program. The Commission indicated they were informed by Sumter CI to no longer recommend incarcerated individuals to the LIFERS program, however, Sumter CI denied this. As such, there still seems to be miscommunication between Sumter CI, FDC, and the parole commission.

Although the LIFERS program was originally developed for incarcerated individuals who had life sentences and were under parole guidelines, the LIFERS program has always remained open to those with and without a life sentence (Kori, 2013). Incarcerated individuals who were recommended by the FCOR, however, would receive priority placement into the LIFERS Program, followed by those who are parole eligible who request to attend the program. Incarcerated individuals who have a determinate sentence are given last choice.
Incarcerated individuals must meet certain criteria to be eligible to participate in the LIFERS program – all participants must have no disciplinary reports for one year and they must have two or more years left of their sentence, as the program takes two years to complete (see Appendix A for a breakdown of program participation eligibility). All incarcerated individuals must be approved by their Classification Officer and then further screened by the program directors to determine if they are eligible for the program. If an incarcerated individual does not meet the standards, he may be placed back on the waiting list or terminated from further consideration. If they meet the program criteria and are accepted into the program, they must sign a participant agreement (Kori, 2013) (see Appendix B).

After the LIFERS program had been running for a few years, the Koris decided to set up an internship program for students from the University of South Florida (USF). In Spring of 2011, the internship program became official. Approximately 70 students have completed this internship at Sumter CI. These interns are typically fourth year students studying criminology and/or psychology. Interns have gone on to have successful careers in organizations, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), the Sheriff’s office in several different counties, protective child service agencies, and legal firms as attorneys.

Moreover, the LIFERS program has had a lot of success throughout the years, with one of the most important benefits being that 90% of incarcerated individuals who have completed the program have remained disciplinary report free (Kori, 2013). Also, research by the P.R.O.P. Inc. shows a 42% increase in one’s positive thinking skills from entry to exit summaries (Kori, 2013). Since the Koris have become the directors of the LIFERS program, over 480 men have graduated from the program. Although only nine were paroled directly from Sumter Correctional Institution,
more than 200 men have been transferred to Everglades Correctional Institution to attend the Correctional Transition Program (CTP) prior to their eventual parole.

Although there are many “lifers” programs or its equivalent at different institutions, this study is focusing on the LIFERS program that is offered at Sumter CI. Sumter CI’s LIFERS program is unique in that it is open to incarcerated individuals with and without a life sentence. Although many of the LIFERS programs at different institutions have the same classes, the curriculum that is being taught is not uniform across institutions. The curriculum for the LIFERS program at Sumter CI has been revised throughout the years, and a chronological order for the classes has been established, such that the classes have prerequisites, which makes the program at Sumter CI unique compared to the others. The curriculum is divided into four semesters of twenty weeks, which takes a minimum of two years to complete. Each of the fourteen classes is held once a week for one and a half to two hours. In addition to attendance and participation, homework is required, as well as a midterm and a final exam. Students must maintain a 70% average to be eligible to graduate (Kori, 2013). At the end of each semester, every participant must be interviewed by the program directors to determine one’s progress, achievements, and shortfalls. If a student fails to meet the standards of the program (i.e., as outlined on the participant agreement form in Appendix B), they may be expelled from the program.

Throughout the two years in the LIFERS program, students move together as a cohort. This teaches those who are incarcerated how to work together to solve problems, improve communication skills, and understand different perspectives. The content that is shared in some of these classes is very personal, and participants must be comfortable sharing information in front of one another. As trust is slowly developed over time, the participants began to open up and are able to learn from one another’s experiences. This is where the uniqueness of the LIFERS program
comes in. The participants begin to form a bond that is unexplainable to those who do not participate. To illustrate, Jerry, a 61-year-old Black male who has served 26 years and is one of the main facilitators for the LIFERS program voiced, “Many of the participants have said that learning the terminology and hearing of similar struggles from other fellow participants has helped them to see the tunnel for real change. A paradigm shift is at hand.” They look out for each other as if they are family. They know stories about someone’s past that made that person who they are. They begin to change their thinking habits and grow to want to help others to change their own thinking habits. The LIFERS program at Sumter CI has witnessed these positive changes; changes that deserve to be recognized and shared with others, as these participants are who society would describe as productive, returned citizens.

In 2010, a complex at Sumter CI was designated as a dedicated LIFERS program dormitory where all program participants live, including class facilitators. This dormitory has proven to be beneficial for those involved in the program, as it encourages positive behavior. The men who reside in this dormitory become united, as they have a goal to complete the program and change their criminal thinking errors. Living side-by-side with those who have the same goals motivates individuals to become better versions of themselves, as they are also able to go to anyone in their dormitory for help in their classes at any time. In addition, this assigned dormitory is also a safer, cleaner, and more positive environment compared to the other dormitories. A positive environment fosters growth. Individuals placed in the LIFERS dormitory who are not affiliated with the LIFERS program do not fit in well with the others. For example, Ralph, a 55-year-old White male in the Control group who has been incarcerated for 22 years for a sex offense stated:

See we had somebody here that was putting people into those dorms that didn't know I didn't belong in that dorm. I wasn't a part of that program. You know, I wasn't I didn't belong in that dorm J [LIFERS] dorm. But they put me in there. I didn't belong in there. I'm a disruption. I'm not a part of the classes. I'm an outsider. Yeah, that was one of the
problems. I was an outsider. Okay...don't put outsiders in there. Because I mean, they're not, they're not a part of the fellowship and the brotherhood. You know, and that's what you're trying to create, an intimacy in there.

Freddy, a 67-year-old White male in the Treatment group who has been incarcerated for 37 years stated:

But it's kind of funny, because when you sit in the dorm after a while, and you watch the guys that are in the program, and you watch brand new guys that maybe they moved in for bed space. And you look at them and these people look like they came from another planet. They act like they came from another planet, you know, we're kind of a family and we're a program and as humans, you get to know each other. We work a certain way. So, when an outsider comes in, they stick out like a sour thumb.

On August 17, 2010, the DOC certified the LIFERS program as a Re-Entry alternative to their existing 100 Hour Transition Program. Although this certification was a significant milestone, there has yet to be an evaluation of the LIFERS program. This study begins to fill this gap.

Data Collection

Sample Recruitment

The study was conducted at a Florida State prison – Sumter CI. The study met the ethical standards of the University of South Florida and was approved by the full Institutional Review Board (IRB #002948). The Sumter CI Warden also approved all data collection efforts. Recruitment letters were sent out by the head prison chaplain to the incarcerated individuals’ tablets (see Appendix C for an example of the recruitment letters). Sending the recruitment letters via tablet did not bias the sample as the institution gives all incarcerated individuals a tablet free of cost. If an individual was interested in participating in the study, he would send a request to the head chaplain, who would then inform me and provide me with these requests, so I was able to contact him. Once I was put into contact with the interested individual, we would arrange a day (either a Tuesday or a Friday when I was present at the institution) and a time that did not conflict
with his work schedule. The chaplain would then put this individual on the call-out, so all correctional staff were made aware that I was conducting interviews in the chapel with this participant.

To be eligible to participate, the LIFERS graduates must have all volunteered to enroll in the LIFERS program (i.e., they were not recommended by FCOR). To illustrate, the parole board may require some individuals to attend this program, whereas others may voluntarily participate. Considering there will likely be significant differences between those who have been ordered by the parole board and those who have volunteered for the program (i.e., motivational differences), I chose to interview only those who voluntarily participated. Additionally, all participants must have been incarcerated for 25-plus years, be proficient in the English language, and housed at Sumter CI. There were no other restrictions with respect to those eligible to be a participant.

This study includes 40 participants – 20 participants who had graduated from the LIFERS program (hereinafter referred to as the Treatment group) and 20 participants who did not participate in the LIFERS program (hereinafter referred to as the Control group) as my focus was to understand the differences in institutional misconduct, social support, and readiness for reentry for participants vs. non-participants. For efficiency reasons and the structure and scheduling of the prison environment, I conducted interviews as soon as the chaplain would give me an “inmate request.”

Treatment and Control group participants were matched using a two-step sampling process. First, all Treatment group participants were recruited, and once I had 20 participants for the Treatment group, I then began recruiting Control group participants who matched the demographic criteria from the Treatment group so the two samples could be as similar as possible. To do this, I received a list of all incarcerated individuals who were 45 plus years old (because the youngest
participant in the Treatment group was 46 years old) directly from Sumter CI. I used this list of individuals and selected all individuals who matched the demographic criteria from the Treatment group. I, then, followed the same recruitment process; the head chaplain sent out recruitment letters to these individuals, and if interested, they would send a request to the chaplain. As Table 1 shows, results revealed that there were no statistically significant differences between the Treatment and Control group participants in terms of race, crime, and sentence length, and whether or not it was their first incarceration. Also, there were no statistically significant differences in age for Treatment and Control group participants. It is also important to note that the majority of the study participants are still sentenced under parole guidelines, meaning that while they may be serving a life sentence, they still have the possibility of parole.

Table 1. Treatment and Control Group Demographic Comparisons (Treatment = 20; Control = 20; N = 40)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Chi-Square/t</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Crime</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex-Offense</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Life Sentence</strong></td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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<td>57.75</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: With the exception of age (mean values reported), all values in the Treatment and Control columns are the number of participants within each category; N/A indicates that a statistical test is not applicable because there is no variation in race across groups.
Once the individuals gave their verbal consent to engage in the research, one-on-one interviews took place in the prison chapel and lasted approximately one to two hours (the average interview length was one hour and ten minutes). I conducted all interviews between September 2nd, 2021, and November 2nd, 2021. All incarcerated individuals interviewed for this study had been in prison for 25 plus years and were convicted of either a homicide or sexual offense with the exception of one participant who was convicted of burglary. This participant, Henry, is a 71-year-old in my Treatment group who has been incarcerated for 51 years and has a life sentence due to his status as a chronic offender.

During these semi-structured, in-depth interviews, I asked questions about institutional behavior, social support within prison and outside prison, and whether or not they felt ready for reentry. The interview questions directly assessed these three variables (institutional misconduct, social support, and readiness for reentry) – asking questions related to the number of DRs one has received throughout their time incarcerated, whom they view as a form of social support (if any), and overall feelings of preparedness for reintegrating back into society. I used follow-up questions to get individuals to further explain responses as they related to these three concepts. I also asked about other program involvement, education level, job/trade experience, perceptions of correctional staff, etc. (See Appendix D for LIFERS and non-LIFERS interview packets). Participant names have been changed to participant ID numbers in all data files (i.e., 001-040) to protect their anonymity. However, as I mentioned earlier, for purposes of this study, I will use pseudonyms rather than ID numbers. For a full list of study participants please see Appendix E.
Qualitative Analysis

All interviews audio recorded with the participant’s consent. The interviews were transcribed by undergraduate students participating in USF’s CREATE (Crime Etiology and Treatment Evaluation) lab at USF. These undergraduate students did not have access to the participant’s name, only participant ID numbers, thus further ensuring participant anonymity. All 40 interviews were coded using NVivo. NVivo is one of the most used and powerful computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that “allows researchers to analyze open-ended responses to survey and/or interview questions, as well as other text data like reflective writing, image, and videos” (Feng & Behar-Horenstein, 2019, p. 563). Within NVivo, I created 31 inductive and a priori codes, which helped to understand the larger themes that emerged from both the Treatment and Control group interviews. Some of the codes that were developed include the following: Benefits of LIFERS program, Challenges of Release, Changes in Visitation, Ever Received DR, Expectations of Release, Reasons for Hope, Reasons for Readiness, Relationship with Prison Staff, Social Support, etc. To ensure intercoder reliability, Dr. Grosholz and I coded the first five interviews together to develop and refine codes while also confirming that we were coding the interviews in a similar manner. This process helped to alleviate the possibility of subjectivity that could result from a single coder; thus, increasing the rigor and validity of the analysis. While we did not quantify the level of agreement, we were able to check our work against each other’s while also having robust discussions around any areas of disagreement.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

In addition to the interview data, I also obtained disciplinary reports (DRs) and visitation records directly from Sumter CI from 2001 to present (e.g., 20 years) for each participant in my study. From the DR records, I was able to see what date they received the DR, at what correctional
facility, how many gain time days they lost, and what their DR was for. The visitation records showed the date and time they received the visit, at what correctional facility, who the visitor was (e.g., visitors name), and their relationship. These records allowed me to assess differences in misconduct and social support for Treatment vs. Control group participants. In addition, using this collateral data, I was also able to compare the data to the self-report data I received from conducting interviews. I found that participants provided fairly accurate information, however, interestingly, there were a few participants that I had developed more of a rapport with due to my status as a volunteer at Sumter CI. These individuals seemed to not be as truthful in reporting their DRs and visits. To illustrate, there were Treatment group participants who, when asked in the interview about their DR and visit history, claimed they had no recent DRs and/or received a visit every weekend or very frequently. However, when I received the DR and visit data from the institution to confirm this, I found that, some participants, in fact, did have a recent DR, albeit being minor DRs (e.g., disobeying verbal order, telephone violations, being in an unauthorized area, etc.), and did not receive visits as often as they had claimed.

For each participant, I used Microsoft Excel to chart the number of DRs and visits one had per year, then I found the average number of DRs and visits for all 20 participants in the LIFERS group per year, as well as the total sum of DRs across all 20 years. I followed the same formulas for the Control group. Once I had these averages for each year, I plotted them on a line graph (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 in Chapter 4, which details my results) to compare the differences in the number of DRs and visits for the Treatment and Control group participants.

In addition, I also conducted independent sample t-tests by year (from 2001 to 2021) comparing the mean values (number of DRs and number of visitations) of program participants to those who did not participate, as well as pooled regression analyses clustered by the individual.
The pooled analysis uses ordinary least-squared regression for the count outcome, and logistic regression for an outcome indicator whether the individual received any DR (coded as 1) or no DR (coded as 0). The same coding scheme was used for visitation records. If the individual had had a visit during the 20 years, it was coded as a 1. If they did not receive a visit, it was coded as a 0. All analyses were conducted in STATA SE 17.
CHAPTER FOUR:

RESULTS

This study seeks to understand how participation in the LIFERS program at Sumter CI influences institutional misconduct, social support, and readiness for reentry for participants compared to non-participants. In what follows, I will use the interview data along with the institutional records to shed light on participants’ experiences with misconduct and social support as well as their perceived preparedness for reentry. The first section on institutional misconduct explores the relationship between incarcerated individuals and correctional staff and what motivates the participants in this study to stay out of trouble. In addition, this section provides a discussion of the facilitators of the LIFERS program, as well as differences in the levels of hope between Treatment and Control group participants.

Institutional Misconduct

To determine potential differences in misconduct between program participants and non-participants, I analyzed inmate-specific disciplinary records (DRs) from 2001 to 2021. It is important to note that one of the criteria for incarcerated individuals to be eligible for enrollment into the LIFERS program is to have no disciplinary reports for one year. As such, I gathered DR records dating back to 2001 in order to get a less biased representation of DRs for LIFERS program participants versus non-participants. In other words, if I only received DRs for the past five years, the LIFERS participants are likely to have very few DRs as they were eligible for the program.

With respect to DRs across the study, Treatment group participants had a mean of 0.093, with a range between 0 and 4; whereas Control group participants had a mean of 0.184 DRs, with
a range between 0 and 5. Figure 1 plots the average number of DRs by group from 2001-2021. This figure demonstrates that there are only minor differences between the two groups. In addition, a comparison of group-means by-year shows that there were no statistically significant differences between Treatment and Control group participants from 2001 to 2021, with the single exception of 2007 ($t=3.20$, $p<.01$); though, this could have been driven by outliers in the sample or chance as there is no known substantive rationale for this year, and this year alone resulting in a statistically significant difference.

**Figure 1.** Average number of disciplinary reports for study participants from 2001-2021

As the first column in Table 2 also shows, there were no statistically significant differences between the Treatment and Control group participants in terms of DRs. The pooled regression analyses demonstrated that, on average, there is not a statistically significant relationship between being in the LIFERS program and whether or not one received a DR.
Table 2. Pooled OLS Regression Analyses for Disciplinary Reports

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Clustered standard errors by year are in parentheses.

However, seven participants in the Treatment group – Freddy, Jerry, Charles, Benjamin, Oliver, Henry, and Alan – never received a DR during this time frame compared to five Control group participants – Brian, Scott, Patrick, Frank, and Peter. Although the majority of the DRs received by all participants in both the Treatment and Control group were minor infractions, Control group participants had more gain time days lost as a result of their infractions. For instance, excluding the seven participants in the Treatment group that have never received a DR during the time frame analyzed, of the remaining 13 participants in the Treatment group, six participants who had DRs on their record did not lose any gain time days. The Treatment group participants lost 600 fewer gain time days than the Control group participants (1135 days compared to 1735 days, respectively). Lastly, both Treatment and Control group participants had a low rate of major infractions (e.g., possession of a weapon, fighting, etc.) compared to minor infractions.

To understand the men’s experiences with institutional misconduct, I asked each participant if this was their first incarceration, how many institutions they had been at, how many DRs they had received throughout their entire incarceration, when was their last DR, and in general what were these DRs for. I asked the 28 men who received DRs if they had served time in disciplinary confinement (DC) or closed management (CM), and if so, how many days. Control
group participants were more likely to have been sent to DC if they received a DR. Most participants had never served close management (CM) time, indicating that their DRs were usually for minor infractions. Control group participants, however, had more DRs as a result of fighting compared to Treatment group participants.

In fact, the majority of the DRs mentioned by both Treatment and Control group participants can be seen as “petty” DRs, as Ethan, a 59-year-old White male in the Treatment group who has served 25 years explained:

The last one was for disobeying an order, verbal order, because I didn’t have hearing aids at the time, and I didn't hear him saying what he wanted me to do. That's why I got hearing aids now, that's one reason the doctor put down on my paper.

Another Treatment group participant, Philip, a 58-year-old Hispanic male, when asked if he had ever received a DR replied: “One, my DR back in 2011. I missed a legal callout.” Philip had forgotten to go pick up his legal mail, and thus received a DR. Also, the following conversation took place with Joe, who is a 54-year-old Control group participant who has been incarcerated for 36 years:

Interviewer: Have you received any DRs?

Joe: Oh, I haven't had a DR since I cannot remember. My last DR was at Hardee CI, so that was in the 2000s. I think it was around 2006.

Interviewer: Wow, a long time ago.

Joe: Yeah. No need to really fight, no need to really have to work or have violence and everything. By that time people know who to leave alone and not to leave alone, I was slowing down. Unfortunately, with the passing of my grandparents, I came into a little bit of money, so I didn't have to go out there and live off the land and hustle on the compound to make money and stuff like that, so it wasn't necessary for me to, you know, do the things that I had been doing earlier as far as like, getting involved with gambling and dope and, you know, things like that. I was able to put all that stuff away and kind of just chill out a little bit, so, you know, but unfortunately, I had to lose two grandparents to get that, so I don't know. I'm not sure that's a great trade off.
Relatively speaking, when discussing DRs with Control group participants, there seemed to be feelings of blaming officers or other incarcerated individuals or a general sense of confusion for the reasons why they received a DR. Whereas, LIFERS participants were more likely to understand why they had gotten a DR, even if they felt that it was a petty DR; they seemed more accepting of responsibility. For example, Bobby, a 61-year-old White male in the Treatment group who has been incarcerated for 30 years, when asked if he had any DRs, stated:

“I got I have two DRs. The first DR I ever got I had possession of stolen property state and or personal. The second two I got 22 and a half years later. I got them [at Sumter CI], both at the same time. One was for having possession of stolen property state and or personal and the other one was gambling paraphernalia. I was the green, the green guy in prison. I mean let me explain that DR; it was simple, somebody asked me to hold something for them, and I held it, and when I got shook down, it was in my possession and what you know what it boiled down to was it wasn’t mine, but it’s in my possession, it’s mine. So, they considered it stolen because it was out of the kitchen. It was an ounce of yeast, baker’s yeast that [other incarcerated individuals] were using to make wine with so I was holding onto it. It was like really, I was green, I got tried. No big deal.

Whereas Bruce, a Control group participant serving a life sentence for a homicide offense responded: “Total about nine.” I then followed up the question and asked if the DRs were major or minor infractions, or a combination of both. Bruce answered:

No real major DR’s. They [correctional staff] consider fighting a major DR, but when I first came in at that age you have to, you have to fight back then, I mean in order to keep what’s yours...but I’m protecting me and mine.

Bobby, the Treatment group participant, acknowledged that although the item he was holding was for someone else and was not his, because it was in his possession, he understands why he received a DR. Bobby mentioned that it was “No big deal,” whereas Bruce, the Control group participant, justified his DRs by explaining that at the time he came to prison, fighting was necessary to protect yourself. Even if this may have been true, fighting was, and still is, classified as a major DR.
Relationship between Incarcerated Men and Correctional Staff

One major element of prison life that can impact institutional misconduct is the relationship between incarcerated individuals and correctional staff. Due to the coercive environment in prison, it is often difficult for incarcerated individuals to develop positive relationships and achieve their goals (Colvin, 2000, 2007), increasing their chances of engaging in misconduct. Research provides evidence that incarcerated individuals’ measures of procedural justice, including perceptions of correctional staff treating them fairly, is linked to lower levels of institutional misconduct (Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; Reisig & Mesko, 2009). Accordingly, when incarcerated individuals are able to foster positive relationships with correctional staff, violence and misconduct should be at a minimum.

There were distinct differences between the Treatment and Control group participants in terms of their communication and relationships with prison guards. LIFERS program participants were more likely to claim that they got along with correctional staff, some even sharing stories of how an officer helped them at one point in time. On the other hand, Control group participants were more likely to adhere to the “convict code,” an informal set of rules established amongst the incarcerated individuals, such as “don’t talk to the guards,” “no snitching,” etc. (Mitchell et al., 2017). In fact, the Treatment group responded more positively when asked how they get along with prison guards. Treatment group participants felt like the correctional officers treated them “less like an inmate” and more “like a human.” For example, Terry, a 57-year-old White male who has served 29 years on a life sentence for a homicide offense, described his relationship with officers in the LIFERS program as mixed, some officers he felt he could not communicate with, while the other officers, he felt quite differently:
Think of us as an animal because sometimes, you'll feel like that makes you feel like an animal, so some people turn into animals in here that have really rough roads, you know, they are not strong in their mind or whatever, not physically strong.

Henry, who has never received a DR, described his experience with officers such that, “They talk to you civilized. They’re not in your face. Their job description is not to make life miserable for you, or punish you, they actually treat you civilized.”

The majority of Control group participants, however, were more likely to avoid any sort of communication with correctional officers, as these individuals appeared to be adhering to the convict code (Mitchell et al., 2017). Bruce remarked:

Since I've come into prison, it's been us, us against them type of deal. There's a dividing line. There are inmates, there's convicts. So, there's us and them in an inmate population among the population. So, there's convicts and inmates, they don't have no respect. They don't have no dignity or honor stuff like that. Convicts- they live by certain code. There's respect, ya know, for other inmates. But as a convict, you don't get with officers. There's no communication with officers. There's a, there's a cutoff point. You can deal with officers on a face-to-face level. Okay? How are you doing today? I'm doing good. Thanks. And then we move on, but having personal conversations with the officers, it just doesn't happen.

Similarly, Scott, another Control group participant who is 62 years old and has served 21 years for a homicide offense, asserted that “When I first started in prison it was you stay out of my face, I stay out of yours. And that's the way that mentality was.” Many of the Treatment and Control group participants discussed that throughout the years, they have witnessed a shift in the officers’ attitudes. Present day officers are beginning to communicate more often with incarcerated individuals in a less aggressive manner, and further their involvement in programs by attending events for the program and most importantly, recognizing the benefits of the program. This has improved the relationship between those incarcerated and correctional staff as Jerry stated: “The ones [correctional officers] who are involved in the programs make a big difference.”
**Personal Motivation and Hope**

During the discussions about misconduct, I also asked the men what motivates them to stay out of trouble. Most participants in the Treatment group had high levels of hope; they felt as if either their faith, family, and/or friends, as well as their involvement in the LIFERS program, gave them hope and motivated them to stay out of trouble and disciplinary-free. By staying out of trouble, then, they were able to continue receiving visits and remain in contact with their outside support. Bobby expressed:

One of the things I’ve said that's always given me hope is that there's still a light. I could still look through the tunnel and see the light. I’ve not lost it because my head is sticking out of the hole now. You know, I'm at the point in my life where the tunnel, I'm at the end of the tunnel. But the only thing there is that hole is my head sticking through, and I can see everything around it that's outside; there just can't get the rest of me through it yet. So, I'm good with that. You know, my faith and my relationship, my family, my friends, keeps me going. You know, there's nothing I want to just lay down and give up for.

However, Treatment group participants also described their hope as often being challenged and declining over the many years they have been incarcerated. To illustrate, Leo, a Treatment group participant, is a 55-year-old White male who has been incarcerated for 27 years on a homicide offense. He stated:

[Hope] diminishes. The level of it diminishes, like, more and more, as time goes on. You hope they're going to do this. I mean, it's like every year they talk about we're going to do this, they're trying to do that, they're trying to do this for us. And okay, I've been hearing the same shit for 30 years. They kick us in our face every time they [incarcerated individuals] go, here's another kicker. Here's another kicker.

When Leo says “they,” he is referring to the FCOR. When he is discussing the “kickers,” he is indicating how FCOR continuously denies or pushes back an individual’s next parole hearing. Andrew, another Treatment group participant who has served 31 years for a sexual offense expressed:

I'm burning out, I’m tired. Keeping busy keeps my mind going. There is no way for me to find out where [my stepdaughter] is at. My doctor, my friends on the street give me a little
bit of hope at least they're out there, they're doing something. Of course, you know, there's my faith, but even that at times gets tested.

Over time, individuals’ levels of hope decline due to the constant strain they are experiencing, as well as getting their expectations up, for example, when a new legislative bill is going under review that may change their current circumstances, to get the same results. Individuals mentioned that their family and friends were a constant hope to them, and even when their hope was being tested, the majority of the Treatment group participants described staying out of trouble with the help and support of their family. The constant hope that they would return home to their family allowed them to refrain from deviant behavior. Most of the Control group participants explained that they “adapt to the environment you’re in and ways of acting in here [prison]” said Scott. The Control group participants were more likely to carry negative attitudes and behaviors associated with the norms of the prison nature.

*LIFERS Program Facilitators*

In addition, 17 out of 20 participants in the Treatment group are facilitators of the LIFERS program, meaning they are the class instructors for other incarcerated individuals. Facilitators hold similar duties as a teacher, developing and teaching lesson plans, grading tests and midterms/finals, providing tutoring to individuals outside of class time, etc. Jerry explained:

I get a lot of hope, from, say, the LIFERS program. Because of being coordinated with it. What happens is that people are able to come to me and vibe with me, sit down and talk. And I see things in their life where they, they have given up, or want to give up. And so, I get a chance to use what we've been teaching in here, to give them hope. And by seeing their hope increase, it actually increases my own hope.

In addition, facilitators also mentioned being motivated to be on their best behavior because they know they must be an example to all other individuals who are involved in the LIFERS program. Jerry again stated:
I'm a facilitator now, so setting a good example means a lot to me. Because I can't ask the
next person to obey rules that I won’t obey. Or to behave in ways that I won't behave. So
that's a big help.

Charles, a Treatment group participant who is 59 years old and has spent 40 years incarcerated,
similarly explained:

Right, I will say this, because I do believe this, I believe that the LIFERS program, by me
being a facilitator does keep me more centered, because I believe that people are watching
me. And because they're watching me, I can either choose to shoot holes in the program,
or I can carry myself in such a way that they say, wow, maybe this thing really does work.
And maybe I should give it a shot.

Oliver also voiced, “Even though I graduated, the program is still helping me. Because even when
you are giving a class, you still learn stuff from some of the feedback you get from the guys in
class.”

LIFERS program facilitators felt as if correctional staff viewed them differently because
of their position as a facilitator. To be a facilitator, an individual must be selected by the program
directors, as well as possess many quality skills such as being trustworthy, accountable, and
respectable to both staff and other incarcerated persons. To illustrate, the following conversation
took place between Noah and me; Noah, a Treatment group program participant, is a 54-year-old
White male who has been incarcerated for 34 years:

Interviewer: Do you believe that participating in the LIFERS program has improved your
relationship with staff? Do you think they look at you in a different way now that they
know that you went through the program and are now a facilitator?

Noah: Yes, the staff treats me, I'll say they don't treat me different, but they see me
different. And I know that I'm held to a higher standard than inmates who don't participate
in a lot of programs or programs in general.

Interviewer: You said you’re held to a higher standard compared to those who aren’t
involved in programming?

Noah: I know they do. They've said it to me many times, so I knew that to be true. Even
administration is saying that they were held at a higher standard; they see us here versus
everybody else. And that's important because that says that they see our change.
Overall, although the quantitative results for DRs shows that there was not a statistically significant difference between Treatment and Control group participants, the interview data suggest that the Treatment group participants were more likely to claim they got along with correctional staff, had higher levels of hope, and LIFERS program facilitators felt motivated to stay out of trouble to be a good example for the men in the program. Specifically, correctional staff who are cooperative in the development and administration of prison programs may be viewed as a form of social support by program participants (Colvin, 2007).

Social Support

In this section, I explain how both Treatment and Control group participants, who are likely to experience a decline in visits and emails, may be encouraged to seek social support from outside program volunteers and staff. To determine potential differences in social support between program participants and non-participants, I analyzed inmate-specific visitation records from 2001 to 2021. During this time period, the mean number of visits for LIFERS program participants was 20.12, with the range between 0 and 213 visits. Control group participants, in contrast, had a range between 0 and 88 visits, with the mean being 8.05. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the Treatment group participants received more visitors. Indeed, analysis indicates that there were at least marginally significant differences between Treatment and Control group visits for 40% of years (8 out of the 20 years analyzed, 2001-2021, \( p<.10 \)). These years include 2001, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2011, and 2019-2021.
As Table 3 reveals, pooled OLS regression analysis also portrays that there were marginally statistically significant mean differences between Treatment and Control group participants ($p < 0.10$), such that LIFERS program participants received, on average, 12.14 more visits than Control group participants. A pooled logit model clustered by individual also indicated that Treatment group participants were more likely to have at least one visitor than Control group participants ($p < 0.05$). Ultimately, there were marginally significant differences in the number of visits received during this time frame, such that the Treatment group participants had an increase in visits compared to Control group participants.

**Figure 2.** Average number of visitors for study participants from 2001-2021
Table 3. Pooled OLS Regression Analyses for Visitations

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<th>Visitations</th>
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Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Clustered standard errors by year are in parentheses.

Social Support from those in Prison

Although the visitation records for the Treatment group indicate a high number of visits, due to the decrease in visits throughout their time incarcerated, many of them rely on the LIFERS program directors and staff, as well as other incarcerated individuals enrolled in the program, as a form of social support. For the 20 Treatment group participants in this study, the average age was 59 years old, thus many of these individuals have lost their loved ones (e.g., mothers, fathers, spouses, grandparents, etc.) throughout their time in prison. When individuals are going through difficult times, such as dealing with the losses of family members, they turn to the LIFERS program to keep their mind occupied while being surrounded by positive peers and outside support associated with the LIFERS program.

Bobby stated:

I got a good support group, and you need that in here. If you know, I know a lot of guys in here that don't have anybody. Yeah, you know, unfortunate that I do. And in that, you know, I want to give them all the support I can give them from this side.

Terry also mentioned:

I have a friend in here that has, for years, been a mentor, a confidant, somebody that if I'm hurting, he understands enough about me and who I am and what I have endured in my life and my history, that I allow him to hold me accountable when I needed to be held
accountable. It's big. And you don't do that with too many people on this side of the fence that you can trust to do that, both for your incarcerated. So, you know, when I, when I have dark times, he's there to keep me in line, so I don't get stupid. When I need somebody to give me some advice, that's who I will talk to. That's been a great relationship. That's an incarcerated man who's got probably maybe 10 or almost 15 years more time in prison than I do. But we live in the same area. He's right next to me. And vice versa. So that's great. That's been a good support tool in here from one incarcerated to another.

Similarly, Control group participants also mentioned social support from other incarcerated individuals with whom they associate, referring to these individuals as family. Bruce, a Control group participant, is a 51-year-old White male who has served 28 years. He stated:

I know quite a few people throughout the years that have passed. And it is kind of hard, because I mean, now these hardened criminals are pretty much my family. Those people I'm learning from and respect. I'm learning; learning how to open up with, how to communicate with, and I mean, hardened criminals get that teddy bear hearts in here.

Bruce continued to explain:

Most of us most of us come from broken homes, broken families, broken environments. Environments where there's no general love or consideration of care. So outside of that when you come to these institutional programs, you do find that there are teachers that genuinely care and want to teach them

Jerry expressed a similar point of view:

There have been many people along the way who have helped. Different chaplains who have been a great help. Different volunteers who come into the chapel that have gotten to know me personally who have become a great encouragement, who look forward. It's almost like getting a visit every day. Because when they come in, you have a personal relationship with having a camaraderie built on price. It’s a definite help.

Social support while incarcerated may help one serve their time and adapt to the strains of the prison environment (Agnew, 1992). Social support when released, however, is also beneficial to one’s reentry experience. Interestingly, from the visitation data I received from the facility, there appeared to be a pattern amongst the men that had a high level of visits – these men, in general, seemed to be more reliant on their family while incarcerated and when discussing their plans for reentry. Oliver, a Treatment group participant who has received 1,638 visits over the 26 years he
has been incarcerated, mentioned, “I think when you when you have family still there for you when you get out. That’s, that's a big plus.” Joe also explained:

You can't send me just anywhere, man, if I've got family, you need to put a person that has been incarcerated for so long back, you and your family. You got to have that family support, they have to, that's absolutely a must. They've got to have that person where they can lean on, they can cry too, then you know, and stuff like that and in my case, it's going to be a little weird because my people are so near the end of their lives, you know.

**Prison Programming and Levels of Social Support**

Both Treatment and Control group participants felt that denying the opportunity for them to participate in prison programming negatively impacted their levels of social support. Colvin (1992, 2007) found how the removal of therapeutic and educational programs had lasting, damaging effects on the behavior of incarcerated individuals. Instead of these individuals relying on the programs as a form of prosocial support, they may now attempt to meet their needs by getting involved in non-conventional groups or gangs, which may increase their likelihood of engaging in deviant activities (Colvin, 2002). Walter, a 55-year-old Hispanic male in the control group convicted of a homicide offense remarked:

Something that, a lot of guys don't come in here as gang members. They become gang members when we're in here because they want that family feeling of family, a false sense of family feeling their gang provides. When, well, if you gave them direction, you gave them classes, you gave whatever, and the DOC will say we’re giving them that now. But that's actually not true, you’re taking away. You’re talking to a man who's been here 29 years. They take away programs. They'll re- budget things more towards security and less towards rehabilitation. And for the officers’ gears, you know, get higher tech, what's the necessity of wearing a taser? I mean really. What the necessity of that? If you look at the use of the force in the prison system, they’re not that often. Why allocate this amount of money towards putting in tasers when that money could have been used for programs?

Although the majority of the 40 participants whom I interviewed had some form of social support on the outside (family member, friend, spouse, etc.), they all expressed that there had been a decrease in their visitations and emails throughout the years due to prison difficulties such as being transferred very far away from one’s family, the costs of traveling, having a limited number
of individuals allowed on their call list, as well as potential visitors getting older and passing away. Andrew, a 55-year-old White male in the Treatment group who is serving a life sentence for a sexual offense mentioned that “most of the people [he] communicates with on the street are ex-cons.” He also stated:

The others that I've met over the years through the church, all died off. Buddies die because usually, you know, there's older people that write, that will write the prisoners and I’ve been going for 31 years so now, they're 71. They start well. They go aging out. Yeah, and that's what's happened. To most of them, most of my visits. I haven't had those in many years now. Even my mom hasn’t come when my son died. Nobody came.

Anthony also stated:

The longer you in prison, the less you hear from people. With the exception of having that close bond such as with family, you may have one brother and one sister that says, you know what, no matter what, I'm gonna be here for my brother. While the rest of them say well, I'm always here, but are you gonna fill up your car with gas and drive to the middle of nowhere? Because this camp here is not a bad drive. But the rest of these prisons are in the middle of nowhere, and I mean that once you turn off the interstate, it’s five miles in here, 10 in here, another five miles, and then also in prison. And more than nine in prison they got in Florida, they're in the middle. So, you got someone that's gonna come see you. That's a plus, just in that. Those are dangerous roads that only using big trucks travel. So now you have a chick with a baby or something. You know, she's trying to keep the baby in your life and you're the father. And you're in prison. And she got to hit that dangerous road with a newborn child or toddler, have a flat tire in the middle of nowhere. So, all that plays a toll.

Incarcerated individuals who have been involved in prison programming discussed having very high levels of social support from both the program staff, as well as their program-oriented incarcerated peers. Specifically for the older incarcerated population, such as the participants in this study, the support received from prison programming may eventually be the only form of support they will have as outside support such as family, friends, etc. declines throughout the years.

Removing or denying prison programs is common and can have iatrogenic effects (e.g., increases in misconduct). The more involved an incarcerated individual is within the prison, the more social support they will receive. Increased levels of social support – whether from inside or
outside of the prison – may also improve behavior and reduce levels of misconduct. Social support acquired from within the prison can also provide incarcerated individuals with hope that they will receive assistance (e.g., financial, emotional, physical) if they are to be released. Thus, they may be more likely to believe that they are prepared for reentry if that day ever comes.

**Readiness for Reentry**

Within this last section – Readiness for Reentry – I will examine the differences in the levels of perceptions of reentry readiness between the Treatment and Control group as well as describe some of the barriers and feelings participants felt they may experience if they were to be released such as returning to prison on a technical violation, housing for those convicted of a sex offense, and affecting their family and friends. During the interviews, I asked participants numerous questions regarding whether or not they felt prepared to leave prison. In many cases these were hypothetical discussions. However, these conversations revealed some interesting findings. In particular, Treatment participants felt that it is up to them to prepare for reentry. Many of the Treatment group participants mentioned how the prison system has failed to prepare them for reentry. For example, Terry explained:

> Hey, if I hadn't taken it upon myself, they wouldn't prepared me for anything. They haven't done nothing but house me. Everything I've done, I've done on my own. Basically, all the jobs that I've got, I've been working. I mean, they put me in one time in the kitchen, I got the heck up out of there because I didn't like it. But they haven't prepared me really in anyway. I prepared myself.

Oliver also claimed:

> I think the thing about it is the institutions. I just wish they were doing more to help people transform one life at a time. I wish they will really apply the mission statement. But they’re not doing that.

Other Treatment group participants also felt that although the institutions provide them with jobs, they should, As Andrew said, “Make it more like real life instead of just warehousing us. Give us
meaningful jobs, make the suffering more meaningful.” By providing incarcerated individuals with more meaningful jobs, they may develop skills that can potentially translate into a successful reentry.

Although the majority of the participants felt that the institution had done little to prepare them for reentry, most Treatment group participants felt prepared if they were to be released, whereas the Control group participants did not feel as prepared for release. Many of both the Treatment and Control group participants had been involved in some form of correctional programming (education, vocational, PSE, faith-and-character, etc.). However, it is possible that the LIFERS program specifically contributed to the Treatment group participants overall feelings of reentry preparedness as the Control group participants still felt uneasy when discussing plans for reentry. In fact, Joe, a Control group participant, stated:

Honesty, I pretty much made up my mind that I'm going to die in prison. I'm 54 years old, [I've done] 36 years in prison. What the hell am I going to do out there on the streets? Life is passing by, I'm institutionalized…The idea of being released is terrifying.

When I asked Joe if he thought he was ever going to be released, he remarked:

If I say yes, I'm hoping for something and I'm really tired of getting disappointed, you know, but if I say no, I sound like somebody who's given up, and I really don't know if I've given up or not. I don't believe this, if I ever do get out, I want to go away and be by myself. If I want some land out there where there's no one around and I can grow a garden and maybe pull fish out of a pond or stream and just be left alone, but that’s not going to happen. So, I don't even think I'm looking forward to getting released because it's trying to make all the adjustments into a society, and listen, I ain't gonna lie, I look at television and I look at the way these morons just completely disrespecting intelligence of American people, left and right on the news, and everybody's little political agendas and stuff like that, and I'm like, “man, this this, this just I can't.” Just, if how, no, I don't see how I could go out there and actually succeed. I just, I don't, I don't see how I could.

Also, when I asked Frank, another Control group participant who is a 62-year-old White male that has been incarcerated for 30 years if he had any concerns if he were to be released, he replied, “[Not] knowing what to do.”
In comparison, although all participants in this study had a life sentence (with the exception of one Control participant – Roger – who has a 2037 release date), Treatment group participants had an increased likelihood of having a plan developed for their potential release. Though some Control group participants claimed that they felt ready to walk out of the gate immediately if given the chance, most were unable to answer basic questions regarding housing and employment, two factors closely associated with recidivism (Bushway et al., 2007). Some Control group participants may have felt as if they were ready for reentry due to their prior experience with reentry, as 35% of Control group participants had been convicted and served prison time prior to this current incarceration compared to only 10% of Treatment group participants. This difference may also explain why the majority of Treatment group participants felt ready for reentry – they may have had idealistic expectations of reentry because of their lack of reentry experience. As Arthur stated, “As humbly as I can say it, I am fully ready.”

Also, many of the Treatment group participants felt confident in their reentry because of the promises that some of their forms of social support would make them. To illustrate, Oliver has no concerns over finding a job because he claimed to have jobs lined up for him if he gets released. Oliver stated:

Sometimes I think about this thing of finding a job. Because you hear so many stories, about other guys, how hard it is as soon as you as they hear that you are ex-cons and all that stuff. I think one thing I got going for me, there's a preacher that comes here, that he also did time in the place long time ago. And he got his own ACL business. And he's always told me, he's like, you get out of here. He said, I guaranteed you’re gonna have a job with me. Then I got another friend of mine that his pictures on the bulletin board right now, he’s also told me because he said he stays in touch with me. He’s also told me that I got a job when I get out because he got out to his brother-in-law, help him raise back the company that he had doing our tiles and rugs.

Further, although participation in prison programming can improve the employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals (Blomberg et al., 2011; Foley & Gao, 2004),
many of the participants in this study are reaching, or have reached, the age where they are physically no longer able to work. For example, the following conversation took place with Henry, who as mentioned earlier, is in his 70’s.

Interviewer: How prepared would you say that you feel right now?

Henry: I believe I could do well, you know, like that and career and data entry position. I'm 70 years old, I'm not physically really safe to do a lot of physical labor. I don't know how long my business is going be assured with me, not everybody who has macular degeneration gets it, but because of my age and because my mom and her father had it, puts me in real high risk and I got cataracts in both eyes…So, I don't know how long we'll be able to continue my job over there.

Freddy also explained:

The other thing that would concern me is that I'm now 67 years old. I came into prison when I was 23. So, my job possibilities, first of all, careers over more, I can't ever have a career. So now I'm back to just having a job. And finding a job at 67-year-old of age is not going to be high on anybody's hiring list.

Carl, in his late 60’s as well, remarked:

Finding work, especially at an older age. I know that I could talk it out. I could fit in, I can blend in. I always been a person to people person, that people person that can adapt to the situation, that can adapt to. Where I'm at, I can adapt to what part of town I'm in, or I can adapt to the situation, so I know that I would make, you know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, I know that I would make it but it's a process.

In general, participants were concerned about their age affecting their employment prospects, as well as returning to prison.

Charles stated:

If they [DOC] released me, my biggest concern would be coming back to prison. That's because literally, that's all I thought about is getting out of prison. So, if I were to get that opportunity, I don't want to blow it. I mean, I would really, you talked about in reference to something else, walking on eggshells. I would be walking on eggshells. If they released me, my biggest concern would be coming back to prison.

Leo stated:

My biggest concern was to be released because of stipulations, and things that would be put upon me, we know the parole stuff. Being able to get sent back for some stupid or petty
violation. Like, you know, like, my damn house burned down last night. So, I went stay in a motel room. Oh, you move without telling me without authorization, you're violating? And I've seen it done. I wouldn't be concerned about having a roof over my head or being able to get a job or anything. Because, yeah, know, I will shovel dirt if I have to make a living, you know, but I'm saying, but being under the thumb.

Terry also explained:

So, I'm constantly thinking of, how can I be successful when I get out of here, I'm not coming back here. I get out of here. I'm not coming back. There's nothing that's gonna bring me back. I've got grandkids; I want to be a grandfather. Yeah. I want to be there for my kids.

Reentry and “Being under the Thumb”

Many participants mentioned “being under the thumb” as a term used to describe the control that the DOC would still have over them if they were to be released. Although parole ended in 1983, over half of the participants in this study (N= 29) are still on the old parole system, thus their concern was violating one of the parole conditions without being aware they had done so. For instance, Ethan mentioned:

I’ve seen a man come back to prison because he didn't wear a seatbelt and he had the seatbelt, was hanging outside his car and was driving down the road. As he drove cop pulled him over, well you weren’t wearing your seatbelt. Came to the prison, three years for not wearing his seatbelt.

Moreover, because almost half of the participants in this study (N =17) were sex offenders (SOs), their biggest concern was finding a place to live when released.

Freddy stated:

In an ideal world, my challenge is that my challenge is going to be this and that's what your neighbors think. Because you got to live in, you got to live somewhere. And in this day and age, with me being an S.O., even though it's adults, and maybe worse for some people. But I'm available on the internet, you go pull my name up, and you find my smiling face and my charges. So, there's no, there's no room for anything, you just got to be honest. And so, how my neighbors would receive me is a concern so that I can live somewhere in a decent way.
Similarly, Jerry described, “Concerns, first housing, because I am an S.O. So, I have a sex charge, then you have to live in certain areas and all these different restrictions.”

While many of the treatment group participants expressed worries about reentry, they still felt prepared when asked about reentry. They felt as if the LIFERS program specifically had provided them with a fully loaded “tool belt” that has given them the skills they need to be successful upon release. Bobby explained this very well:

Reentry falls on the individual. LIFERS gives you the tools, I have a toolbox, I need to make sure I understand that I need to use a flat screwdriver instead of a Phillips screwdriver when the screw requires me to use a flat, and I think that toolbox that they give us. If we draw the right tool, we can make any situation work out for our benefit. You know, they couldn't prepare this better than they have.

Control group participants, on the other hand, did not seem as prepared if they were to be released. They had little plans to discuss, as well as claimed reentry would be more of a “cultural shock” (Scott). Other Control group participants were worried about being a “burden” to their family if they were to be released. Walter stated:

The bigger deal for me is not so much… getting out. It's the burden. That's all. That's all… That's a bad word. Actually, my aunt told me to stop doing that. But I see so much of the effect that I've had on my family and how I could have been there for them. To talk about brothers, sisters, kids, wife, parents. And sometimes you wear that. You know you wear that on your shoulders. Family would be a big deal for me because the time away. Reacquainting myself with my family is one thing too.

Patrick, a 62-year-old Black, male who has served 36 years also mentioned:

You know, I don't want to be a burden, but that's my, that's my biggest thing. I don't want to be a burden on anybody. I've even told my children, you know, cuz like my daughter was like “Dad, when you get out, you gonna move with me,” and I'm like “Well, maybe.”

Control group participants were concerned with how society would view them, and how they would handle others’ reactions and comments. Russell, a 57-year-old Black male in the Control group, when asked what his biggest challenge would be if he were to be released, stated: “My
biggest challenge is to be accepted, be accepted back in society.” Larry, a 70-year-old White male in the Control group, answered in this way:

You know, my biggest concern probably if I'm released, is probably you know, making sure to provide for myself and to be able to, you know, be able to keep, you know, a room, a place to live, and be able to eat and take care of ourselves. And that would be, that would be the biggest concern.

Having to take care and provide for oneself was a common concern for Control group participants as they had gotten adjusted to the everyday routine and structure that the prison provides. In addition, they felt like they would affect their families by coming home after being away for so long. In general, although treatment group participants were concerned about returning to prison on a technical violation or not being able to obtain adequate housing and employment due to their age, most felt as if they were prepared for release. Compared to Control group participants, they felt as if they had acquired the necessary skills from the LIFERS program that could make them successful, returned members of society.
CHAPTER FIVE:
DISCUSSION

Within this mixed methods study, I analyzed the effectiveness of a life-skills program that is offered at Sumter CI to assess the more immediate changes that may result from prison programming such as institutional behavior, levels of social support, and readiness for reentry. Most of the research on prison programming uses recidivism as the outcome variable, however this study fills this gap by measuring short-term benefits that may result from participation in a life-skills prison program. Research has consistently shown that participation in educational programs may reduce recidivism (Wilson et al., 2000; Aos et al., 2006; Mackenzie, 2006; Aos & Drake, 2013; Bozick et al., 2018). Though it is important to consider recidivism and other post-release outcomes (e.g., housing, employment, etc.) when testing the effectiveness of prison programs, there are additional benefits for individuals while they are still incarcerated. More specifically, prison programming may lead to a reduction in institutional misconduct by reducing strain (Agnew, 1992; Lahm, 2009; Latessa et al., 2015; Pompoco et al., 2017; Courtney, 2019), become a form of social support by increasing one’s social bonds (Hirschi, 1969; Blevins et al., 2010; Leigey & Ryder, 2015; Clark & Rydberg, 2016; Kallman, 2020), and increase post-release readiness by serving as a “turning point” in one’s life (Giordano et al., 2002; Bushway & Apel, 2012; Bozick et al., 2018; Pelletier & Evans, 2019; Makarios et al., 2010). This study addressed these three particular outcomes using a sample of 40 incarcerated men in a Florida state prison – 20 of whom participated in a 2-year life-skills program and 20 of whom did not.
The results from interviews and institutional records reveal that there were no statistically significant differences in DRs between Treatment and Control group participants. However, there were marginally significant differences in the number of visits received with Treatment group participants receiving more visits. Importantly, Treatment group participants, however, felt more prepared for reentry possibly due to higher levels of social support or the skills they acquired from participating in the LIFERS program, or both. These findings are discussed further below.

Overall, Treatment and Control group participants did not have statistically significant differences in the number of DRs they received from 2001 to 2021. It is possible that the men from both groups in the study, with the average age being 58 years old, have aged out of crime. The majority of the participants were older than 30 years old in 2001, which was the first year of DR and visitation data I collected for this study. One of the most robust empirical relationships in criminology is the age-crime correlation (Quetelet, 1984 [1831]) – crime ascends in adolescence, peaks in adulthood, then begins to decline. Accordingly, participants in this study had already surpassed this age and may have experienced a decline in their criminal offending propensity. It is also worth mentioning that DRs were, in general, very low for both groups over this time frame. It is possible that if I had received each individual’s total DR data (i.e., from the year they entered prison to the present), there may have been statistically significant differences between the two groups.

I also believe it is important that I mention that at the time of this study, Sumter CI was transitioning into an incentivized prison (IP), which means that all incarcerated individuals at Sumter CI must be disciplinary report free for five years. Although there are some exceptional circumstances that can allow individuals to stay at Sumter CI even if they have received a DR in these five years; final decisions are made by the warden. I mention this because one of my main
goals of my thesis was to compare LIFERS graduates versus non-LIFERS participants on institutional misconduct. However, due to the transition to the IP, all incarcerated individuals (unless the warden has made an alternative decision) who had received a recent DR were being transferred to other institutions. I believe if Sumter CI was not undergoing this transition, there would have likely been more significant differences between LIFERS and non-LIFERS participant’s disciplinary records.

Also, Treatment group participants who did receive a DR were less likely to lose gain time days. This may be because Treatment group participants discussed having a more positive rapport with correctional staff as a result of their involvement in the LIFERS program. Perhaps, then, the officers may be less likely to remove gain time days as a result of disciplinary infractions. Interestingly, many individuals also mentioned that they had spent so much time with the officers that they have gotten to know and establish a sort of “friendship” with them. This may lead to the officers holding these particular incarcerated individuals (i.e., LIFERS participants) to a different standard, or a different set of rules. Correctional officers play an important role in an individual’s incarceration experience. Accordingly, establishing these officer-incarcerated individual “friendships” may increase one’s social bonds and encourage them to desist from subsequent criminal behavior, while also decreasing the strains of their day-to-day life in prison. Future research should investigate how relationships and friendships between correctional staff and incarcerated individuals are related to disciplinary reporting and subsequent punishments.

In addition, although participation in the LIFERS program did not influence the number of DRs one received, it was a factor that positively contributed to their feelings of hope. Treatment group participants shared increased feelings of hope from being involved in the LIFERS program. It may be that completing and graduating from the LIFERS program served as an identity change
in one’s life-course, such that they are now able to recognize their capabilities and acknowledge the skills they have to offer. There were also marginally significant differences in the number of visits received from 2001 to 2021 between the two groups. The Treatment group participants may have done a better job at maintaining contact with outside individuals, whereas the Control group participants may have relied on other incarcerated peers as a form of social support. Treatment group participants may have recognized the significance of the strong social bonds that were being developed over time with other program-oriented individuals and program staff, volunteers, etc., and may have begun to either increase or start connecting with outside support to gain the same benefits. Future research should explore how program-oriented individuals maintain their outside support. Specifically, future research should dive deeper into exploring the relationship between educational programming and institutional misconduct. Program participation may be used as a proxy measure for post release misconduct, providing prison officials with a management tool that might be useful to predict future criminal offending when released (French & Gendreau, 2006).

Further, even though all individuals in this study had been incarcerated for at least 25 years, Treatment group participants, acknowledging their older age, had more plans for their future than Control group participants. It may be that Control group participants had become institutionalized and had made a home out of prison, whereas Treatment group participants had higher levels of hope that they would eventually be released. These differences could be due to the fact that, as mentioned earlier, there may have been motivational differences between Treatment and Control group participants. For example, the Treatment group participants may have been more motivated in all aspects of life (e.g., faith, family, education, health, etc.) that helped them to remain more positive, whereas the Control group may not have had equal levels of motivation, thus increasing their negativity when discussing the possibilities of being released. Also, because of the frequency
with which LIFERS program participants were receiving visits, as well as their communication with outside individuals involved in the program, these individuals may feel like they are familiar with what is going on beyond the prison walls. They also have more experience interacting with outside individuals through programming. These interactions may increase their feelings of preparedness for reentry as they feel they are able to contribute meaningfully to conversations with those that are not serving time in prison.

Also, because the average age of the participants of this study was 58 years old, many participants shared their frustrations regarding eligibility requirements for some of the prison programs that are offered, such as having to be a certain age or only permitting those with a short-term sentence. For example, Adam, a 58-year-old White male in the Control group who has been incarcerated for 26 years for a sex offense charge mentioned:

You know, if you if you're going to have a program and claim that you're bettering men's lives one life at a time, then why would you take away the very thing that they're holding on to for some type of, you know, gratification some type of relief, or something to look forward to….some kind of light at the end of the tunnel.

A Treatment group participant, Anthony, who is a 48-year-old Black male, incarcerated for homicide who has spent the last 27 years in prison stated:

I would change the access to the whole population and don't just stereotype certain sentences or release dates. So, if you're going to have programs, make it for everyone, not just your reentry guys because there would be no reentry right now for guys that had 10-15-20 years, whatever it was. You don't give no rehabilitation and when you get to the end of the sentence, you make them do a class for two months and it's okay, get a reentry book, and you're ready, then you get out with 50 bucks and nothing to go with.

Some participants were unable to enroll into programs due to these policy changes and eligibility requirements. Carl, a 68-year-old White, male who has been incarcerated for 30 years, almost half of his lifetime, stated, “With a life sentence, vocational programs are not encouraged to those of us who have life sentences so I couldn't join any.”
By denying certain groups programming or removing programming altogether, prisons are in a sense reducing levels of social support and increasing potential strains, which could have a detrimental impact on the overall well-being of the institution. Therefore, it may also be beneficial to examine if the denial of prison programs for individuals with long-term sentences impacted their behavior and overall perceptions of self-identity. For example, these individuals may feel as if they are serving no purpose by remaining idle while incarcerated, as well as unable to achieve their goals and thus, increasing their strains and stressors.

In addition to the aforementioned avenues for future research including exploring how program-oriented individuals maintain contact with outside individuals, further investigating the relationship between programming and institutional behavior, and looking at how the denial of prison programming may affect institutional behavior and self-identity, there are several additional directions for future studies. First, future research should consider how prison programming affects those with short sentences and low-level offenses as this study only explored incarcerated individuals who have long-term sentences and have served a minimum of 25 years. Future research should also attempt to quantitatively measure hope as this would provide a more accurate representation of if/how hope may change after program completion; comparisons can be made from pre-treatment levels of hope to post-treatment levels of hope.

Limitations

As with all research, this study is not without its limitations. First, this study excludes all incarcerated individuals who have short-term sentences as all 40 participants had served over 25 years and were convicted of either a sex offense or homicide (with the exception of one participant who was convicted on a burglary charge). Thus, the results of this study are not able to demonstrate if this program – the LIFERS program – is effective for incarcerated individuals who are convicted
of low-level offenses and who are serving a shorter sentence. The results of the study are also not
generalizable to other correctional facilities across the nation or even across Florida, as I only
examined one program in one Florida state prison out of the 143 facilities statewide (FDOC, n.d.).
However, this program is one of the many that exist in Florida. During the fiscal year 2019-2020,
close to 18,000 incarcerated individuals participated in academic education programs. Almost
6,000 participated in career and technical programs, 766 earned their GED, 2,367 obtained
vocational certificates, and 2,572 were awarded with an industry certificate (Department of
Corrections Inmate Programs, n.d.).

Further, one of the eligibility requirements for this study was that the participant must have
voluntarily signed up for the LIFERS program. Therefore, there may be a selection bias because I
excluded all incarcerated individuals who had been sent by FCOR. Consequently, individuals who
volunteered to participate in the study may already have higher levels of motivation compared to
those who were requested to attend the LIFERS program by FCOR. Similarly, Treatment group
participants who have chosen to volunteer for the LIFERS program may differ from Control group
participants in terms of motivation, being academically involved, and planning for the future
(Bozick et al., 2018). For this reason, the study may have been affected by selection bias, such that
there may have already been pretreatment differences between Treatment and Control group
participants prior to this study that cannot be attributed directly to the LIFERS program itself.

Lastly, for the past 3 years, I have been a volunteer at Sumter CI assisting in teaching classes
for the LIFERS program. Working with these incarcerated men inspired the idea for my thesis
after seeing changes in the men who had graduated from the LIFERS program while I have been
there. Although this study is primarily based on self-report data (e.g., interviews), I believe that
the already established rapport I have with those who have graduated from the LIFERS program
(e.g., half of the sample) might have affected participation rate and their responses in an unknown way. They might have been more honest as a result of knowing me. In contrast, they might have been somewhat reluctant to disclose negative aspects of themselves. Importantly, in this study, I used institutional data for each participant in addition to interview data. By receiving DR and visitation records from the facility, I was able to validate the responses of the incarcerated participants. Therefore, I was able to explore whether a participant had given inaccurate responses when asked about their disciplinary record and visitation history. As mentioned in Chapter 3, I did find some inconsistencies between the self-report interview data and the inmate-specific data I received. There were a few Treatment group participants who were more familiar with me who were not as truthful in reporting their DR and visit history, however, this could either be due to memory recall issues or them being wary of how I would view them if they were truthful, or both.

Policy Implications

Evidence has shown that investing in a variety of educational programs can be beneficial despite the fact that correctional facilities house individuals with heterogenous educational backgrounds and needs. Therefore, we must strive to increase the funding and implementation of programs offered in prisons. Quite shockingly, as of 2016, only 35% of state prisons in the United States provided college-level courses (Kallman, 2020), which translates into only 6% of the incarcerated population across the country being offered these courses (Bender, 2018). Additionally, separate dormitories for program-oriented individuals should be a priority in all correctional institutions to reduce the exposure to negative peers.

Funding for correctional programs nationwide should increase as the benefits often outweigh the costs. Aos and Drake (2013) explained how just spending a small sum of the state’s correctional expenditures on educational programming can produce an increase in savings for the
state from policing to courts to corrections. Just like the LIFERS program at Sumter CI, there are many correctional programs that are free of cost, thus implementing such programs may save DOC money by preparing incarcerated individuals for release and reducing their chances of returning to prison or jail.

Further, more programs offered in prisons should be recognized and accredited through DOC for incarcerated individuals to have a better chance of meaningful employment after release. Currently, incarcerated individuals in the state of Florida must be transferred to Everglades CI and complete their DOC-accredited program, the CTP, prior to being released. However, a majority of the incarcerated individuals who have been released through the CTP by the parole commission completed the LIFERS program at Sumter CI prior to being sent to Everglades CI. Many of the same classes that the CTP offers, the LIFERS program offers as well. Perhaps the LIFERS program should also be a recognized DOC-accredited program where individuals can be released directly from Sumter CI rather than having to be transferred (sometimes farther away from their family) prior to being released. If Sumter CI was certified in this capacity, more incarcerated individuals could potentially participate in programs of this nature.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this study revealed that there were no statistically significant differences between the Treatment and Control group in terms of the number of DRs received from 2001 to 2021; however, there were marginally statistically significant differences in the number of visits received throughout this same time frame for both groups. The Treatment group, though, expressed having higher levels of hope; hope in terms of faith, family, friends, and being released. Additionally, the Treatment group felt more prepared for reentry if they were to be released.
Prison programming may not only increase one’s social bonds by having program directors, volunteers, and staff become a form of social support, but may also decrease strain by being presented with positively valued stimuli (e.g., education, other program-oriented individuals, etc.) while decreasing the presence of negatively valued stimuli (fighting, drugs, deviant peers, etc.). Receiving education may be viewed as a “turning point” in one’s life, thus more attention must be paid to the potential benefits of programs offered in prisons. Prison programming is a crucial factor related to one’s incarceration experience. Incarcerated individuals often express how “voluntary participation in education programs … [may be the] only positive experience one may encounter while incarcerated” (Piché, 2008, p. 4). Being a graduate of a correctional program may not only serve as a signal that an individual is ready for employment (Bushway & Apel, 2012), but may demonstrate that an individual is, in general, prepared for reentry. Completing a program while incarcerated, despite the constant challenges (e.g., other incarcerated individuals, correctional staff, lack of resources, etc.), may indicate that an individual can accomplish tasks despite being in a controlled environment surrounded by deviant peers.

Prison programming may also help to alleviate the barriers to reentry and help ease the transition back into society, while also helping incarcerated individuals to refrain from being institutionalized by communicating with outside members and completing meaningful tasks (e.g., further developing their reading and writing skills, completing homework, midterm/final exams, facilitating other incarcerated individuals, etc.). For example, Snitow (2011, p. 49) explains how “the impact of education goes farther than just reducing recidivism; it creates citizens – people who want to engage in the debates of their times – out of people who had been alienated” (Michals & Kessler, 2015). Participating in prison programs may allow individuals to develop a sense of hope – a hope that people still care about them (e.g., social support), a hope that they may get out
and be successful, returned citizens, and a hope that they are able to conquer tough times in an even tougher environment.
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APPENDIX A:

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION ELIGIBILITY

Program Participants are selected in one of the following ways:
1. Recommended by FCOR;
2. Recommended by FDC;
3. Recommended by the Courts (*);
4. Parole Eligible Inmate Initiated Request;
5. Determinate Sentenced Inmate Initiated Request.

Incarcerated individuals recommended by the Florida Commission on Offender Review receive priority placement, followed by Parole Eligible inmates who request to attend the Program and finally, inmates with a determinate sentence. Every individual is vetted by a Classification Officer and further screened by the Program Directors to determine eligibility and admissibility to the Program. Students failing to meet the standards set forth in the Participant Agreement may be “recycled” or terminated from further participation.

*NOTE: Due to the materials contained and presented in the LIFERS Program some state courts and agencies have accepted various courses as alternatives to outside programs.
APPENDIX B:

PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT FORM

SCI LIFERS Program Participant Agreement

As a participant of the Sumter Correctional Institution LIFERS Program, I agree to adhere to the following guidelines set forth by the program Directors and FDC staff. I understand that failure to follow these guidelines could result in my removal as a participant by the program Directors, FCOR or by the SCI Administration:

1. I agree to obey all FDC rules and regulations.
2. I agree to remain DR free during my time in the program.
3. I agree to maintain Satisfactory or Above-Satisfactory work assignment evaluations while at SCI.
4. I agree to attend all mandatory LIFERS functions (excused absences will be granted for FDC callouts, prescribed religious functions, or with prior approval of the Program Directors).
5. I agree to complete all required homework assignments.
6. I agree to maintain an overall grade average of 70% for all LIFERS courses.
7. I agree to conduct myself with good character and integrity in my daily life.
8. I agree that should I wish to no longer participate in the LIFERS Program, I may sign out at any time. However, signing out may preclude me from ever again participating in the SCI LIFERS Program.
9. I agree to be housed in the LIFERS Program dorm until such time as I graduate, I am removed from the Program, or I sign out.

_________________________________       _______________      _______________
NAME                                   DC#                                 Date

___________________________________
Program Director

Witness
APPENDIX C:

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Study ID: STUDY002948 Date Effective: 9/1/2021

Form for LIFERS Program Participants

[Date]

[Insert Name]
Inmate Number – [Insert Inmate Number]
9544 CR-476-B
Bushnell, Florida 33513

Dear [Insert Name],

I am a current graduate student at the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa. I completed an Internship at this facility and have continued as a volunteer for the past year and a half. During my time as a volunteer, I have been working with the LIFERS program.

I have been doing research on prisons and prisons. My research is to understand the effectiveness of prison educational programs within prisons. Findings may be helpful in determining whether continued funding of such programs is a good investment.

Reason I am contacting you

I am contacting you because I would like to interview you. I am interested in learning about your experiences going through the LIFERS program. I am interested in understanding the impact the LIFERS program has had on your experiences. For this study, your disciplinary reports and visitation records will be gathered from Sumter Correctional Institution from the past 2 years before joining the LIFERS program, as well as data available online (e.g., age, race, crime, sentence length). One-on-one interviews will last about one to two hours. The interview questions will be about your involvement in programs in prison, your behavior in prison, support from family and others outside of prison, and plans for when you get out. If you agree to be audio recorded during the interview, all audio recordings will be permanently deleted once the recording has been written down.

Research is Completely Voluntary

You are free to participate in this research or stop at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you stop taking part in this study. Your choice to participate or not to participate will not affect the length of your prison sentence, your release status, or your parole eligibility.

Your name and any other identifying information that is discussed during the interview (e.g., date of birth, family names, etc.) will be taken out from any approved recordings and/or notes and will be swapped with a three-digit ID number. For example, one of the men who participates will be coded as 001, another one as 002, and so on. If you agree to talk with me, information that you provide will be recorded and analyzed with the three-digit ID number assigned to you.

Benefits from Participating
I am not sure if you will receive any direct benefit by taking part in this research study. Many men who have participated in studies like this in the past have found it rewarding to talk about their experiences in prison. They felt good about sharing their thoughts and ideas with the goal of helping others in similar situations.

Risk from Participating
This research is considered to be minimal risk, meaning that there is very little chance that you will experience emotional discomfort or harmful effects from participating. It is possible that discussing some things from the past (e.g., bad experiences in prison) could be upsetting. If that happens, I will ask you if you want to continue discussing that material or stop.

Compensation for Your Time
The Florida Department of Corrections does not allow researchers to pay you for choosing to participate in this study.

Protections in Place to Ensure Confidentiality
The University of South Florida (USF) has very strict rules that apply to researchers who interview people to make sure that those who participate are not harmed. The university has approved my study. By law, researchers like me must keep your information as confidential as possible. We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are.

Interested in Participating?
If you are willing to meet with me to discuss your potential participation in this study, please contact Chaplain Williams as soon as possible. She will be able to put you in touch with me.

Meeting Place
If you agree to participate and remain at Sumter Correctional Institution, I will meet with you in the sports room located in Complex 3; no correctional officers will be present during our meeting.

Contact Information for Chaplain Williams
If you have any questions, you may speak with Chaplain Williams or email her at [Insert email here]. Chaplain Williams will be able to put you in touch speaking with me by phone or in person.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and to consider this request.

Sincerely,

Danielle Thomas

Danielle Thomas, BA
Department of Criminology
APPENDIX D:

INTERVIEW GUIDES

A. LIFERS PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

1. What made you want to participate in the LIFERS program?
   PROBE: When did you join?
   PROBE: Do you feel that being in the program helped you in any way?
       o If yes, how did it help?
       o If no, why not?
   PROBE: Would you recommend it for non-program participants? How come?

2. Have you participated in other educational or vocational programs?
   YES ____ NO ____
   IF YES:
       o What program(s)?
       o Did you like these program(s)?
       o What did you like about them?
       o If you could change anything about them, what would you change?
         Why?

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   o Prior to incarceration _____________________
   o During your incarceration _________________
   o If you do not have a high school diploma, have you received your GED?
     YES ____ NO ____
     IF YES:
       o Did you earn it in prison?
       o Did you pursue further education after receiving your GED?
     IF NO:
       o Did the facility have a GED program?
       o Did you qualify for the GED program? Why or why not?
If you qualified and you did not take the GED program, why did you decide not to?

**INSTITUTIONAL CONDUCT**

4. About your incarceration:
   PROBE: How old were you when you were first sentenced to prison?
   PROBE: Is this your first incarceration?
   YES ____ NO ____
   o IF NO, about how many times have you been in prison?
   PROBE: How many institutions have you been housed at?
   PROBE: Have you received any DRs? YES ____ NO ____
   o IF YES:
     o Approximately how many?
     o In general, what were the charges for?
     o How long after your incarceration did you receive your first DR?
     o When was your last DR?
     o Did you serve D.C. (Disciplinary Confinement) time? If so, how long?
     o Did you serve C.M. (Closed Management) time? If so, how long?
     o What was the longest period you spent in confinement at one time?
     o Altogether, how much time would you say you spent in confinement? (6 months or more? A year or more?)
     o Have you gotten in less trouble over the years? How come?
     o Does being a participant of the LIFERS program motivate you to stay out of trouble? Explain.

**SOCIAL SUPPORT**

5. During your incarceration, has there been anyone you have met while in prison who has had a significant, positive impact on your life? (This can be a fellow inmate from any institution, volunteer, staff member, etc.)
   YES _____ NO _____
   IF YES:
     o How did this person impact you?
     o How do you feel that having this person has helped you serve your time?
Give me an example of how this person made a positive difference in your life.

6. Do you keep in touch with anybody outside of prison? For example, do you receive visits, letters, phone calls, or emails?
   YES _____ NO _____
   IF YES:
   o From whom? (Family, friends, any other persons)
   o How often do you receive visits? Phone calls? Letters? Emails?
   PROBE: Have there been any changes in the number of visits, phone calls, letters, emails that you have received while you have been incarcerated? If there have been changes, please explain.

   PROBE: Do you call, send letters to, or email anyone? (Names do not have to be given)? How often?

7. Describe what keeps you going every day. For example, what gives you hope? (Family, friends, reading, etc.?)

   PROBE: Do you feel like you have high levels of hope?
   YES _____ NO _____
   o IF NO, what do you think can give you more hope?
   PROBE: Do you feel like participating in the LIFERS program increased your levels of hope? If yes, in what ways?

8. Do you participate in any religious services?
   YES _____ NO _____
   IF YES:
   o Which one(s)?
   o Why do you choose to participate?
   o Do you feel this has helped you serve your time?
   o If yes, how?

9. Overall, how do you get along with prison guards?
   PROBE: Are there some guards you feel like you can talk to more than others? If so, tell me about them. (Do not provide me with names).
   PROBE: What makes you like this guard as a person?
   PROBE: Do you believe that participating in the LIFERS program improved your relationship with staff? If yes, in what ways? How come? If no, how come?

READINESS FOR REENTRY
10. Have you learned any trade(s) while in prison?
YES ____ NO ____

IF YES:
- Which trade(s)?
- Explain some of the skills you have learned from the trade(s).
- Do you think these skills will be useful if you were to be released? If so, how?
- What trade do you believe has been the most helpful?

11. What jobs have you had while you have been incarcerated?

PROBE: Did you like it? Explain why or why not.
PROBE: Were you able to choose your job? If yes, explain why you chose this job. If no, would you have chosen a different job?
PROBE: What have you learned from these jobs?

12. Do you think it’s likely that you will be released someday?
YES ____ NO ____

IF YES:
- Do you have any concerns about reentry? What are some of your concerns? What do you think will be some of the challenges?
- How prepared do you feel?
- For those that have an end of sentence date, do you have any plans for when you are released? If so, what are your plans? Explain.

IF NO:
- In an ideal world, if you were to be released, what are some of your concerns? What do you think will be some of the challenges?
- How prepared do you feel?

13. Do you think anything has helped prepare you for potential reentry?

PROBE: Do you feel like the facility has helped you? If so, how? What about other individuals? Explain. If no, how come? What could the facility have done to help you better prepare for reentry?
PROBE: Do you feel that participating in the LIFERS program helped you be prepared for potential reentry? What about other program(s)? Please explain.
PROBE: Do you think there is anything you think the LIFERS program could do better to improve your plans for reentry?
14. Do you think you have changed since you have been incarcerated?
   YES ____ NO ______

   IF YES:
     o In what ways?

Debriefing Questions:

1. We have been talking for a while now. How are you doing?

2. Are there any areas that we discussed that you would like to go back to?

3. Are there any areas that upset you? Would it help if we went back to these areas and discussed them a little more?

4. Do you have any questions for me about this interview?

B. NON-LIFERS PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

1. Have you heard of the LIFERS program?
   YES ____ NO ____

   IF YES:
     o What do you know about it?
     o How did you hear about it?
     o Have you ever applied for the LIFERS program?
       o If yes, did you get denied? What were the reasons?
     o Is anyone that you talk to on a regular basis currently involved or has been involved in the LIFERS program?
       o If yes, do you think they have made any changes?
     o If yes, what type of changes?

2. Is there a reason you did not get involved in the LIFERS program?
   PROBE: Do you believe the program could help you? Why or why not?
   PROBE: Is there anything that might interest you in becoming involved in the LIFERS program?

3. Have you participated in other educational or vocational programs?
   YES ____ NO ____

   IF YES:
     o What program(s)?
Did you like the program(s)?
What did you like about them?
If you could change anything about the program(s) you were involved in, what would you change? Why?

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Prior to incarceration ________________
During your incarceration ________________

If you do not have a high school diploma, have you received your GED?

YES ____ NO _____

IF YES:
Did you earn it in prison?
Did you pursue further education after receiving your GED?

IF NO:
Did the facility have a GED program?
Did you qualify for the GED program? Why or why not?
If you qualified and you did not take the GED program, why did you decide not to?

INSTITUTIONAL CONDUCT

5. About your incarceration:
 PROBE: How old were you when you were first sentenced to prison?
 PROBE: Is this your first incarceration?
 YES ____ NO _____
	IF NO, about how many times have you been in prison?
 PROBE: How many institutions have you been housed at?
 PROBE: Have you received any DRs? YES _____ NO _____
	IF YES:
	Approximately how many have you had over the years?
	In general, what were the charges for?
	How long after your incarceration did you receive your first DR?
	When was your last DR?
	Did you serve D.C. (Disciplinary Confinement) time? If so, how long?
o Did you serve C.M. (Closed Management) time? If so, how long?
o What was the longest period you spent in confinement at one time?
o Altogether, how much time would you say you spent in confinement? (6 months or more? A year or more?)
o Have you gotten in less trouble over the years? How come?
o What motivates you to stay out of trouble?

SOCIAL SUPPORT

6. During your incarceration, has there been anyone you have met while in prison who has had a significant, positive impact on your life? (This can be a fellow inmate from any institution, volunteer, staff member, etc.)
   YES ____ NO _____
   IF YES:
o How did this person impact you?
o How do you feel that having this person has helped you serve your time?
o Give me an example of how this person made a positive difference in your life.

7. Do you keep in touch with anybody outside of prison? For example, do you receive visits, letters, phone calls, or emails?
   YES ____ NO _____
   IF YES:
o From whom? (Family, friends, any other persons)
o How often do you receive visits? Phone calls? Letters? Emails?
   PROBE: Have there been any changes in the number of visits, phone calls, letters, emails that you have received while you have been incarcerated? If there have been changes, please explain.
   PROBE: Do you call, send letters, or email anyone? (Names do not have to be given)? How often?

8. Describe what keeps you going every day. For example, what gives you hope? (Family, friends, reading, etc.)
   PROBE: Do you feel like you have high levels of hope?
   YES ____ NO _____
o IF NO, what do you think can give you more hope?
9. Do you participate in any religious services?
   YES _____ NO _____
   IF YES:
   o Which one(s)?
   o Why do you choose to participate?
   o Do you feel this has helped you serve your time?
   o If yes, how?

10. Overall, how do you get along with prison guards?
    PROBE: Are there some guards you feel like you can talk to more than others? If so, tell me about them. (Do not provide me with names).
    PROBE: What makes you like this guard as a person?

READINESS FOR REENTRY

11. Have you learned any trade(s) while in prison?
    YES _____ NO _____
    IF YES:
    o Which trade(s)?
    o Explain some of the skills you have learned from the trade(s).
    o Do you think these skills will be useful if you were to be released? If so, how?
    o What trade do you believe has been the most helpful?

12. What jobs have you had while you have been incarcerated?
    PROBE: Did you like them? Explain why or why not.
    PROBE: Were you able to choose your job? If yes, explain why you chose this job. If no, would you have chosen a different job?
    PROBE: What have you learned from these jobs?

13. Do you think it’s likely that you will be released someday?

    YES ____ NO ______
    IF YES:
    o Do you have any concerns about reentry? What are some of your concerns? What do you think will be some of the challenges?
    o How prepared do you feel?
    o For those that have an end of sentence date, do you have any plans for when you are released? If so, what are your plans? Explain.
IF NO:

- In an ideal world, if you were to be released, what are some of your concerns? What do you think will be some of the challenges? How prepared do you feel?

14. Do you think anything has helped prepare you for potential reentry?

   PROBE: Do you feel like the facility has helped you? If so, how? What about other individuals? Explain. If no, how come? What could the facility have done to help you better prepare for reentry?
   PROBE: Is there any program(s) you feel have helped you prepare for potential reentry? If yes, explain.

15. Do you think you have changed since you have been incarcerated?

   YES ____ NO ______

   IF YES:

   - In what ways?

Debriefing Questions:

1. We have been talking for a while now. How are you doing?

2. Are there any areas that we discussed that you would like to go back to?

3. Are there any areas that upset you? Would it help if we went back to these areas and discussed them a little more?

4. Do you have any questions for me about this interview?
# APPENDIX E:

Table 4A. List of Study Participants

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<tr>
<th>Participant ID #</th>
<th>LIFERS Participant</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>Sentence Length</th>
<th>Time Served</th>
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