Examining the Impact of a Criminal Background in Social Work Education

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EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF A CRIMINAL BACKGROUND IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Amy S. Vliek, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2018

Many returning citizens want to access higher educational institutions (HEIs) to access desired professions and increase employability. However, many HEIs and profession education programs have restrictions in place for returning citizens. An MSW is the most sought-after degree for returning citizens. However, social work education has restrictions in place for returning citizens. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the lived experiences of MSW returning citizen students considering these restrictions. The dissertation attempts to answer the following research questions: How did applicants who disclosed a criminal background at the time of application experience the MSW application process? Did the applicant understand the university or department’s policies regarding criminal background disclosure? What is the lived experience of an MSW student who entered the MSW program with a criminal background known by the MSW program?

The dissertation is a mixed-methods study that incorporates a cross-sectional electronic survey and interviews conducted using the Reflective Lifeworld Research phenomenological approach. MSW students in Michigan were recruited to participate in the study via e-mail invitation, Facebook notifications, and snow-ball sampling. Twenty-three individuals completed the survey and nine individuals were interviewed. The findings offer insight into the experience of MSW students during both the application process and as MSW students.
Returning citizen students discussed the differences between punitive and supportive policies, talking at length about the increased time for admissions decisions and the impact that a criminal background has on field placements. The findings offer support for current research outlining the specific gifts that returning citizens provide to HEIs and guidance for MSW programs in policy and procedure development.

Keywords: returning citizen students, recidivism rates, cumulative disadvantage, supportive policies
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KEY TERMS

**Non-Convicted Peers** individuals who are in the peer group of returning citizens and do not have a felony or misdemeanor conviction.

**Lived Experiences** the experiences of a phenomenon as explained by individuals who has experienced the phenomenon.

**Returning Citizens** individuals who have a felony or misdemeanor conviction and are no longer incarcerated or on probation or parole.

**Returning Citizen Students** students who have a felony or misdemeanor conviction and are no longer incarcerated.

**Re-Entry Programs** programs offered to returning citizens who are still involved with the criminal justice system.

**Social Justice** “the exercise of altering, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions, among other forms of relationships.” (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002, p. 162)
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2014 approximately 2.2 million individuals were incarcerated in jails and state or federal prisons within the United States (Lockwood, Nally, Ho, 2016). These individuals are returning to their communities seeking employment, housing, and with a desire to become successful contributing citizens. The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (the code) calls on social workers to advocate for social justice and to partake in “social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully” (NASW, 2008, p 1). Social work education is limiting access to education for individuals with a criminal background (Leedy & Smith, 2005). The vast majority of Master of Social Work (MSW) education programs are limiting access is by requiring criminal history disclosure at the time of application to MSW programs (Haski-Leventhal, 2010). Admission policies requiring criminal background disclosure have far reaching implications for returning citizens who want to become professional social workers. Applicants who disclose a criminal background and are accepted start their graduate education with a criminal background known by the MSW program. However, research on the impact of these policies on MSW students is virtually non-existent. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory dissertation is to examine the effects of mandatory disclosure on the application process and the educational experiences of graduate social work students in Michigan.

Many issues impact a returning citizen’s access to education, including criminal background disclosure at the time of application. Recidivism research related to criminal convictions is relevant to this dissertation because it offers information on recidivism risk. The
criminal justice system and returning citizens’ relationship with it, both during incarceration and
after release, also impacts access to education. The criminal justice system in the U.S. has
proven to be less than just, especially when considering the arrest and conviction rates of African
American men (Kutateladze et al., 2014). This issue is of particular importance to the social
work profession as we strive to reflect the demographics of our clientele in the demographics of
our profession. The sociological concepts of public opinion and the common good are crucial
factors to consider because they interact heavily with public opinion. Public beliefs about
individuals with a criminal record impact the way returning citizens are treated, policies that
impact them, and community involvement/investment in re-entry programming and initiatives.
Stigma and labeling theories provide a sound theoretical foundation in which to frame the study.
(Opsal, 2011). All of these issues are examined in detail due to their impact on returning
citizens.

State policies restricting returning citizen’s rights impact access to professional licensure
and employment. The Michigan Public Health Code Act of 1978 (MPHCA) and its impact on
the topic are examined. Higher educational institution (HEI) policies on admitting students with
a criminal background are critical to this dissertation. The policies of all ten MSW programs in
the state of Michigan are examined.

The philosophical foundations of the social work profession as laid out in the National
Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics provide a unique perspective for analyzing the
issue (NASW, 2008). When the issue is examined through this lens, and when the gatekeeping
role in social work education is acknowledged, the profession is forced to address the ethical
dilemma between individual rights and public safety. This is further complicated by the
dilemma regarding perceptions about how to protect public safety. Social work educators are
called on to act as ‘gatekeepers to the profession’; ensuring that only those who are academically and personally fit enter the profession. There is much debate about the gatekeeping role of social work educators, and restrictions based on criminal convictions are a large part of the debate. Lastly, we must acknowledge the benefits that returning citizens offer to HEIs and the profession of social work.

Overview of the Study

Recidivism Research

For this dissertation, it is important to examine two specific aspects of recidivism; recidivism factors that reduce an individual’s chances of re-offending and recidivism rates for specific crimes. These aspects must be thoroughly examined to effectively evaluate the level of risk schools of social work take in admitting returning citizens. Recidivism research is also relevant to this dissertation because of the underlying assumption which justifies criminal background disclosure; the assumption that potential and/or practicing social workers who have a specific criminal conviction/s place social work clients at greater risk of harm than potential and/or practicing social workers without criminal conviction/s. There is no documentation in the literature that the validity of this assumption has been checked. However, this is the assumption used by the social work educators to develop policies related to criminal backgrounds and access to the profession.

Recidivism research offers a plethora of information regarding factors that increase and decrease a returning citizen’s risk of committing another crime (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). College education consistently reduces recidivism (Ford & Schroeder, 2011; Rosenthal et al., 2015; Steurer & Smith, 2003; Burke & Vivian, 2001; Stevens & Ward, 1997; Chappell, 2004). Ford and Schrolder (2011) found that attending college “is a more important turning
point in the lives of subjects than marriage or employment.” (p. 49). Furthering one’s education can lead to many advances and improvements in one’s life. However, for returning citizens a college education can significantly change the trajectory of one’s life. One returning citizen stated

my own reentry transition began not when I got out, but when I started college. It was like a light bulb went off. The more knowledge I gained about myself and my family, race, politics, culture, and policy - the more I knew my own purpose in life was to assist women who came from similar situations navigate the challenges of reentering society after incarceration. (Cheryl, Education from the Inside Out Coalition).

**Criminal Justice System, Race, and Cumulative Disadvantage**

Contact with the criminal justice system has lifelong impact on individuals. It can lead to a reduction in educational, economic, familial, and social opportunities (Pager, 2003). Evidence indicates that steady employment is the number one factor in reducing recidivism, however denial of employment is a common experience for many returning citizens. (Saxonhouse, 2004). Many professions and employers regularly discriminate against individuals with criminal backgrounds. For example, most health care professions either have statutory prohibition of hiring individuals with criminal backgrounds or they require additional clearance and licensure which are “highly over inclusive” (Saxonhouse, 2004, p. 1612).

Racial discrimination leads to higher arrests and conviction rates for African Americans then for Caucasian Americans (Tonry, 2010). For example, even though African Americans and Caucasians commit crimes at statistically similar rates (Kutateladze et al., 2014) 1 in 3 African Americans are imprisoned while only 1 in 17 Caucasian men are (Kutateladze et al., 2014). The evidence of racial bias in our criminal justice system reinforces the importance of research on the
issues returning citizens face, including access to education. The Center for Community Alternatives (Rosenthal et al., 2015) summarized their findings with this warning:

The prevalence of criminal convictions in the general population and the racial disparities found at all stages of the criminal justice system compounded by the prevalence of errors in criminal history information raise grave concerns about the collection and use of criminal history information in making admissions decisions. (p. 28).

The criminal justice system has a large negative impact on access to college education. There is evidence that having a criminal background reduces an individual’s chances of attending college at any level; associates, undergraduate, or masters. The Center for Community Action (Rosenthal et al., 2015) found that the application attrition rate for individuals who were required to disclose their criminal background was 62.5%. Attrition rates were higher than the denial rates, for every one returning citizen who was denied admission, 15 did not complete their application. Caucasians and African Americans have been found to commit crimes at statistically similar rates (The Sentencing Project, 2015). However, the proportion of African Americans who disclose a criminal history is three times higher than Caucasians (Rosenthal et al., 2015). Sixty-two years after Brown vs. Board of Education, the criminal justice system and the social impacts of a criminal background have produced a “de-facto return to race-based discrimination in higher education” (Rosenthal et al., 2015, pp. 26).

**Public Opinion and the Common Good**

Negative public beliefs about individuals with criminal backgrounds have been prominent since the formalization of the criminal justice system. Based on public beliefs about criminal behavior, recidivism, and punishment, many states limit access to professional licenses, including social work. Because of this many social work education programs review criminal
background of applicants during the admissions process. Some professional organizations have endorsed this view. For example, the American Bar Association’s stance is that the loss of professional license is a collateral consequence of criminal conviction (Wheelock, 2005). However, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) have not taken a public stance on this topic.

**Stigma and Labeling Theories**

Stigma and labeling theories offer a theoretical framework in which to set this dissertation. Returning citizens are stigmatized because of their criminal histories. Stigma theory states that people try to manage “whether, how, and when they convey information about their “spoiled identities”” (Opsal, 2011 p. 138). Goffman, who helped to develop and expand on stigma theory, defines social stigma as “…the situation of the individual who is disqualified from social acceptance” (Goffman, p.i). Goffman also differentiates stigma based on the visibility of the stigma (Vassenden & Lie, 2013). He discusses how those with ‘invisible’ stigmas can choose to hide this part of their identity. However, those with ‘visible stigmas, for example individuals who are blind or use a wheelchair, cannot hide this part of themselves. This is an important distinction as having a criminal background is somewhat of an invisible stigma, which can leave returning citizens wondering when they will be ‘found out’. This is true for any individual who has a less visible stigma; they tend to hide their stigma from the population at large (Goffman, 1996; Rosenthal et al., 2015). which helps to explain why the attrition rates for applications are so high.

Labeling theory asserts that individuals are influenced by the labels society at large associates with their actions (Lanier & Henry, 2010). It directly addresses criminality and asserts that formal action and punishment by society promotes further criminal actions (Restivo &
Lanier, 2015). Current work regarding labeling theory is starting to incorporate such concepts as cumulative disadvantage, the differential effects of labels, and negative or positive associations with said labels (Grattet, 2011). Cumulative disadvantage, the process of disadvantage increasing over time due to stigma and labels (Lopes et al, 2012), is of interest to this research, given that many who are impoverished, or members of a marginalized community are at greater risk for a criminal conviction (Grattet, 2011). This has implications for a profession such as social work, which is firmly rooted in social and economic justice for all.

Returning citizens who are interested in pursuing a career in social work must learn to manage the complex issues associated with their criminal background. One returning citizen said “The ironies of my story are many, but they all point to one thing: screening college applicants for criminal conviction histories isn’t necessary and only serves to discourage and exclude some of the brightest and potentially most successful contributors to our society from gaining the education and credentials they need to open the doors to careers that will lead to positions of influence and leadership.” (Rosenthal et al., p. 4)

**Michigan Public Health Code Act 368 of 1978, Section 333.16221**

In social work, individual states develop policies on licensure. Each state has the right to determine whether an individual with a criminal background can be licensed as a social worker. In Michigan, Public Health Code Act 368 of 1978, outlines licensure requirements for all health care professions, including social work. Section 333.16221 (MPHCA) explicitly outlines which convictions limit an individual’s access to professional health care licenses (LARA, 2010). These are addressed in chapter two. Social workers in Michigan came under the purview of MPHCA in 2005 when licensing regulations were passed.
Higher Educational Institutions’ (HEIs’) Policies

Higher educational institutions (HEIs) often have policies that require Master of Social Work (MSW) applicants to disclose their criminal background at the time of application. In Michigan, seven of the ten MSW programs require applicants to disclose a criminal background during application. However, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) recently developed a centralized application system for Master of Social Work programs and this application requires applicants to disclose their criminal background. None of the Michigan MSW programs are using the CAS, however CSWE estimates that most MSW programs will be using the CAS by 2022.

HEIs have policies that impact a returning citizen’s ability to access graduate and undergraduate education. Over 55% of HEIs and 74% of four-year institutions collect and use criminal background information at the time of application for undergraduate studies (Rosenthal et al., 2015.). Those policies can vary from supportive to restrictive, however they all require the returning citizen to disclose their criminal background.

Social Work Profession

The examination of criminal histories and the use of that information to determine admission into the social work profession presents an ethical dilemma for social work educators and the profession as a whole. Social work is a profession built on eradicating social injustices with a primary mission to “enhance human wellbeing and help meet basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.” (NASW, 2008, pp. 1). Social workers often provide services to marginalized and at-risk populations, including individuals with criminal histories. As such, social workers aim to eliminate the social injustices that returning citizens experience.
The social work profession also strives to be representative of the populations it serves. Many of the populations the profession serves are at a greater risk of having a criminal history. For example, in 2008 African American and Hispanic men comprised 58% of the incarcerated males even though they represent only 25% of the total population (West & Sabol, 2009). Further, the profession strives to eradicate the barriers to self-determination, barriers that are often put in place without evidence of their effectiveness and often have negative outcomes for marginalized individuals.

In this light the review of criminal histories in MSW programs can be seen as a social justice issue and one that social work educators must address. Many returning citizens are members of marginalized populations and as such are the individuals that the profession wants to recruit. However, the social work profession is systemically restricting returning citizen’s access to social work education through mandated blanket disclosures. This is an ethical dilemma the profession needs to address: how do we promote self-determination and equal access within our profession while also acting as gatekeepers to the profession.

The figure below is a visual representation of the multiple constructs that returning citizens must face when attempting to earn an MSW.

The Unique Gifts That Returning Citizens Offer HEIs

We must also acknowledge the rare and unique gifts that returning citizens can offer HEIs and helping professions, specifically social work (Rosenthal et al., 2015; Robins, 2012; Westin & Pettit, 2010). HEI students with criminal backgrounds experience a shift in their identity from knowing themselves as ‘convicted criminals’ to knowing themselves as ‘college students’. They carry with them many life experiences that can enhance the classroom experience for all students. They are extremely motivated and have a higher graduation rate then
their non-convicted peers (Robins, 2012). Returning citizens also have much lower recidivism rates than their non-convicted peers who do not attend HEIs (Robins, 2012). Further, they are extremely social justice driven and ‘disproportionately participate in human services, community development, leadership, and public problem-solving fields’ such as social work (Robins, 2012, minute 15.16). In fact, an MSW degree is the most sought-after graduate degree for returning citizens (Rosenthal et al., 2015).

**Problem Statement and Study Purpose**

Currently, policies regarding admitting, educating, and licensing social workers with a criminal background are increasing and tend to restrict access to MSW programs (Madoc-Jones et al., 2007, Perry, 2004, Haski-Leventhal, Gelles, & Cnaan, 2010). Master of Social Work (MSW) programs are increasingly requiring disclosure of criminal background information during the application process (Madoc-Jones, Bates, Facer, & Roscoe, 2007; Perry, 2004; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). The potential impact of this requirement is far reaching for social work
educators and individuals desiring to become social workers, however to date they have not been
topics for research in the field.

This dissertation will focus on the lived experiences of MSW students with a criminal
background. Currently there is minimal published research on the topic, with no found research
on the impacts of MSW processes on students in the U.S. However, there is evidence to suggest
the processes are having an impact on application rates for MSW programs, graduation rates for
students with criminal histories, and discrimination within MSW programs against students
(Madoc-Jones et al., 2007; Perry, 2004; Vliek, Kathari, Huizen, & Curtis, 2011, Vliek, Fogarty,
& Wertkin, 2016).

**Rationale for Study**

This study serves as an exploratory study to gain insight into the lived experiences of
MSW students with a known criminal background. This study is important for multiple reasons.
First, it is an ethical issue facing social work educators and practitioners and therefore justifies
examination. Second, this is the first study in the U.S. to analyze the topic, hopefully providing a
foundation for further study. Lastly, it is a social worker’s duty to promote fair and non-
discriminatory practices. This study will help to bring to life the impacts of policies that are not
firmly rooted in evidence and, hopefully, motivate social workers to advocate for change.

**Rationale for Methodology**

This study uses mixed methods phenomenological research (MMRP) methodology. The
study will have two stages. Stage I will be a quantitative cross-sectional survey that will ask
about the students’ experiences during the application process. Stage II will utilize a
phenomenological method called Reflective Lifeworld Research (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, &
Nystrom, 2008). Stage II will consist of interviews that will examine the experiences of
returning citizen students during their MSW education. The results from stage I informed the questions and direction of stage II.

Mixed methods research often offers benefits that a single method cannot provide. Many qualitative research methods are suited for mixed methods; however, phenomenology is uniquely suited for mixed methods research. As Garza (2007) stated, “the flexibility of phenomenological research and the adaptability of its methods to ever widening arcs of inquiry is one of its greatest strengths” (p. 338). There are five main motivations for using MMPR (Green Carcelli, & Graham, 1998). In the case of this research, the motivation for using MMPR is complementarity; meaning in this dissertation MMPR will enhance the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of each individual method, producing more reliable data. The study will use the quantitative - phenomenology model which uses a “preliminary method from an alternative paradigm with priority given to the phenomenology” (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015, p. 104). The preliminary method is the quantitative cross-sectional survey and the phenomenology method will be Dahlberg’s Lifeworld Research approach. Dahlberg’s Reflective Lifeworld Research approach puts emphasis on the lebenswelt, or lifeworld, which is the everyday world that individuals are constantly experiencing and take for granted (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Dahlberg’s approach is rooted in phenomenological philosophy and allows us to examine “human intentionality and its capacity for seeing meaning and for reflection.” (Dahlberg, et al, 2008, back cover).

Research Questions

The large majority of MSW programs are now conducting criminal history reviews during the admissions process (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). Social work educators do not know how the reviews are impacting students. The research questions for Stage I are:
1. How did applicants who disclosed a criminal background at the time of application experience the MSW application process?

2. Did the applicant understand the university or department’s policies regarding criminal background disclosure?

The research question for stage II is:

1. What is the lived experience of an MSW student who entered the MSW program with a criminal background known by the MSW program?

Outline of Dissertation

This dissertation is a standard five-chapter dissertation. Chapter one gives a general introduction to the topic, provides justification for the study and the methodology, outlines the research questions, and provides definitions of key terms. Chapter two is a thorough review of the literature. Chapter three is a detailed explanation and justification of the methodology. Chapter four will contain the findings, including case examples and themes of the interviews. Chapter five will discuss the findings on the study, including the limitations and strengths of the study, and suggestions of further research.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Introduction

A thorough review of the literature was needed to conduct meaningful phenomenological work. This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of literature related to criminal background disclosures and criminal background checks for graduate social work education. A criminal background disclosure is when an individual discloses a criminal background to an MSW program. A criminal background check is when an individual must provide evidence of all his/her criminal convictions.

An examination of specific sociological theories is critical for a deep understanding of the topic. The sociological concepts of ‘public belief’ and the ‘common good’ and how they impact policy development and implementation are addressed. Stigma and labeling theories are used as a conceptual framework for understanding the impacts policies can have on returning citizens. The philosophical foundations of the social work profession are also addressed. To fully understand why and how social work educators are dealing with this issue we must first understand the values and belief systems of the profession. The NASW Code of Ethics is examined for relevance, as is the role of gatekeeping in social work education.

The Michigan Public Health Code Act (MPHCA) outlines what offenses impact a social worker’s licensure. This code is relevant to this work as it is one of the justifications for criminal background disclosures at the time of application. MPHCA is analyzed through the social justice lens, using Carol Bacchi’s (2008) ‘What’s the Problem?’ framework. This is followed by an examination of higher educational institutions (HEIs) policies on criminal background
disclosure, and an examination of the policies of the ten Master of Social Work programs in Michigan.

Next, pertinent recidivism research is examined to see what it reveals about returning citizens risk of re-offending. Criminal background disclosures for MSW programs are justified by the widely held public belief that returning citizens are more likely to cause their clients harm by re-offending than their non-offending peers. Recidivism data can support or refute this fact, helping us to better understand the issue. Following the recidivism research is a critical examination of the criminal justice system, paying particular attention to racial disparities, cumulative disadvantage, and conviction rates. The criminal justice system is examined through a social justice lens, looking closely at the discriminatory behaviors of the system and the impacts of these behaviors on individuals and communities.

Research suggests that returning citizens offer a unique set of skills and strengths for HEIs and the helping professions, including social work (Brown, 1991; Rosenthal et al., 2015; Robins, 2012). This is a new area of research that aligns with the strength-based theories of social work. From a social work perspective, it is always important to remember that an individual can change, that rehabilitation is possible, and that positive growth can come out of tragedy.

**Why Is This Important?**

Returning citizens face many barriers to successfully reintegrating into their community, including barriers in accessing education and employment. Specifically, individuals who wish to be social workers face additional barriers at the point of entry into social work education, during educational training, and when applying for licensure. The justifications for these barriers are not evidence based, meaning they have not been examined and found to be effective. Social
work is unique amongst healthcare professions because of the ethical standards they are held too, specifically the standards of eliminating social and economic injustice and removing barrier for vulnerable and oppressed populations (NASW, 2008). The ethical standards and values outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics (the code) are rooted in six core values; service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relations, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2008). Social work ethics and values mandate social workers to act when they see discrimination and social injustice, paying particular attention to the needs of historically disenfranchised and marginalized communities (NASW, 2008). These core values call social workers to action and are examined in depth in the social work profession section of this chapter.

The vast majority of Master of Social Work (MSW) programs require applicants to disclose a criminal background and have additional screening for these applicants (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). The questions are asked on the CAS which will increase the use of the question during the admissions process. However, there are no common standards for disclosure or screening of criminal backgrounds and no evidence that the assumptions supporting them are accurate or inaccurate. As one social work educator stated, “while quick to embrace the opportunities to promote social inclusion, social work educators frequently find ourselves policing entry and maintaining the exclusiveness of the profession.” (Crisp, 2009, p. 314).

There is very limited body of knowledge that informs social work educators about the impact these policies have on returning citizens, and few articles published after 2000. There is some research out of England and Wales, and a few studies on U.S. students (Madoc-Jones et al., 2007; Halvonic & Green, 2015; Nelson & Cowburn, 2010). The research suggests that students who are returning citizens face additional barriers such as acquiring an internship and discrimination by faculty members in the classroom (Madoc-Jones et al., 2010). Returning
citizens are also approximately eight times less likely to graduate from their MSW program than their non-offending peers (Vliek et al., 2016). Given the current research, it is possible to conclude that the process of examining criminal backgrounds during the application process can decrease application completion and negatively impact returning citizens experiences as students in MSW programs.

The benefits of successfully engaging in HEIs are life altering for returning citizens (Rosenthal et al., 2015; Halkovic & Green, 2015; Robins, 2012; Westin and Pettit, 2010). They include but are not limited to “improved lifetime earnings, health, relationships with family members and community, the development of a positive identity, and an end to the intergenerational cycle of incarceration (emphasis added)” (Halkovic & Greene, 2015, p. 760). There is also evidence that returning citizens are strongly committed to working in helping professions. For example, an MSW degree is the most sought-after degree amongst returning citizens who pursue higher education (Robins, 2012). Therefore, it seems necessary to critically examine policies in order to determine their effectiveness.

**Recidivism Research**

MSW programs throughout the US consistently apply an addition application review process for returning citizens (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). There are no national standards for this review, however most programs make their decisions based on mitigating factors associated with criminal histories (Brodersen et al., 2009). For example, schools use mitigating factors such as time of offense, successful completion of sentence, number of offenses, rehabilitation statement, and evidence of significant life changes since the event when making admissions decisions (Vliek, Kothari, Huizen, & Curtis, 2011). The mitigating factors used by programs fall into two categories; factors supported by recidivism research and factors associated with social
work professional values. In this section the mitigating factors associated with recidivism research are examined. This research offers valuable information about a returning citizen’s chances of re-offending (Gendreau et al., 1996).

Recidivism research has identified several factors that increase or decrease a person’s likelihood of reoffending (Silver, Smith, & Banks, 2000). Most recidivism research breaks down mitigating factors into two categories; static factors and criminogenic factors. Static factors are factors about a returning citizen’s past that cannot change and alter their recidivism risk (Gendreau et al., 1996). For example, age, gender, previous convictions, and history of antisocial behavior are all static factors. Many static factors including age, gender, and early family factors are mitigating factors that have consistently been associated with higher level of risk of re-offense (Gendreau et al., 1996).

Criminogenic factors are dynamic in nature, meaning they can continuously change, and the status of these factors can either increase or decrease risk of recidivism (Bender, Tripodi, Aguilar, & Thompson, 2010). Criminal companions, interpersonal conflict, substance abuse/use, employment, and education are all criminogenic factors (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). For example, increasing a returning citizens’ education level decreases their risk of recidivism (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996). Research published in the last twenty years has paid closer attention to criminogenic factors and their ability to decrease risk of recidivism.

The research supports many criminogenic factors as decreasing risk of recidivism. Higher levels of self-control decrease risk or recidivism (Bender, Tripodi, Aguilar, & Thompson, 2010). Returning citizens who re-offend tend to commit less severe crimes (Steuer et al., 2003).
There has been a great deal of research done on educational programs within correctional facilities. Although public opinion only marginally supports it, rehabilitation is a primary goal of the criminal justice system (Steurer & Smith, 2003). Correctional education programs, even more than vocational programs, decrease recidivism for returning citizens (Steurer & Smith, 2003). Education can reduce recidivism as much as 19% (Chappell, 2004). Lockwood, Nally, and Ho (2016) found that the chances of unemployment for returning citizens was directly correlated with their level of education; risk of unemployment decreased 16% when comparing those with no high school diploma to those with some college credit.

Quality employment is consistently rated as the number one factor in decreasing recidivism (Saxonhouse, 2004). However, most returning citizens lack the educational resources needed to obtain quality long-term employment (Lockwood et al., 2016). Education is a mitigating factor that can decrease or increase an individual’s risk of offending. Approximately 2.3 million Americans are currently behind bars and approximately 70% of them do not have high school diplomas (Western & Pettit, 2010). Lower educational levels are highly correlated with risk of incarceration and increased educational levels are highly correlated with reduction in recidivism risk (Sturm et al., 2010).

**Criminal Justice System, Race, and Cumulative Disadvantage**

Halkovic and Greene (2015) state that “the extraordinary number of men and women behind bars is the most important civil rights issue of our time.” (p. 761). The criminal justice statistics since the 1990s support this statement. In the past three decades, there has been a steady increase in prison inmates increasing the inmate population by 600% (Lockwood, Nally, & Ho, 2016; Pager, 2003). There are approximately twelve million returning citizens and they make up 8% of the working age population (Pager, 2003).
Race is a crucial factor in incarceration risk. In 2000 approximately 10% of young black men were incarcerated compared to 1% of young white men. Black men have a 28% chance of being incarcerated in their lifetime (Pager, 2003). Per Nixon (2013) Caucasians are incarcerated at a rate of 393 per 100,000, Latinos at 957 per 100,000, African Americans at 2,531 per 100,000, and African American men at approximately 4500 per 100,000. African Americans are convicted at a higher rate and receive harsher sentences for the same crime than Caucasians (Wehrman, 2011). Nearly 60% of African American men who do not complete high school experience incarceration (Pettit & Westin, 2004). These are highly discouraging facts and are cause for a critical re-examination of not only our criminal justice system but the ways in which we re-integrate returning citizens into their communities.

Criminal background disclosure is also a crucial factor in completing the application process for HEIs (Rosenthal et al., 2015). Weissman and NaPier (2015) found that 66% of HEIs screen for criminal backgrounds during the application process. The common application, used by over 500 education institutions for undergraduate application, also requires criminal background disclosure. Rosenthal found that many individuals do not complete the application process because of the questions on applications. This phenomenon is termed ‘felony application attrition’; and it shows that two thirds of applicants with a criminal background do not complete the application process, a rate higher than the denial rate for individuals who completed the application (Rosenthal et al, 2015). Rosenthal’s study found that “the rate of Black applicants with felony convictions who don’t complete the application process due to questions about past records constitutes disparate impact”, (emphasis added) (Halkovic & Green, 2015, p. 762).
Racial disparities within the criminal justice system have a direct impact on MSW students, once again increasing the cumulative disadvantage that returning citizens encounter. One study found that current field placement agencies were more likely to accept non-minority students than minority students with a criminal background for internship (Brodersen et al., 2006). In fact, the agencies were more willing to accept non-minority students with fewer positive mitigating factors (factors that decrease an individual’s chance of committing another crime) than minority students (Brodersen et al., 2006). Most importantly, these field agencies determined acceptance primarily based on type of conviction, which, with rare exceptions, often do not correlate with increased risk of recidivism (Brodersen et al., 2006).

Public Opinion and the Common Good

The sociological concepts of ‘public opinion’ and the ‘common good’ offer great insight into the treatment of returning citizens during incarceration, probation/parole, and adjudication. Public opinion is defined as “an aggregate of the individual views, attitudes, and beliefs about a particular topic, expressed by a significant proportion of a community” (Erikson & Tedin, 2015). Public opinion about the criminal justice system and those involved with it has changed over time. In the 1960s, public opinion supported rehabilitation as a primary goal of the criminal justice system (Cullen, Fischer, & Applegate, 2000). Therefore, educational and other reform programs were more prominent, and conviction rates were stable (Cullen et al, 2000).

However, the prison population grew six-fold between the 1970s and 2000s and, as conviction rates increased, public opinion shifted towards support for harsher punishment (Cullen et al, 2000). Public opinion shifted the most in the 1990s with an increase in support for harsh putative measures, which was most evident in the ‘three-strikes’ laws that were passed in the early 90s (Cullen et al, 2000).
Recent research supports that public opinion is again shifting, although slowly, away from punitive measures and towards prevention and rehabilitation (Thusi & Carter, 2016). There is a movement to ‘ban the box’ (remove the questions about criminal background) from applications to HEIs and employment (Rosenthal et al., 2015; G.E. Martin, personal communication, September 26, 2016).

Public opinion guides and informs policy, and therefore must be questioned when it restricts access to education and employment. Research may support the public opinion, therefore providing evidence that restrictions are justified. However, research could also change public opinion by showing that the restrictions are not effective. Either way, the research must be conducted for discourse, policies, and procedures to be based in evidence.

A wonderful example of how public opinion impacts professional discourse and policy can be seen in Nelson and Cowburn’s (2010) critical analysis of the procedures and policies used during application to MSW programs in Great Britain. The analysis addressed the psychological and sociological approaches to risk assessment. They found evidence that policies supporting restriction are informed by public opinion stating:

It is this moral narrative that underpins and justifies how ex-offenders are treated both by the system of criminal justice and thereafter by other social institutions. This moral narrative then becomes the justification for socially excluding certain (undeserving) groups from social resources, such as education and employment. (pg 1089).

The article illustrates how public opinion can heavily impact professional attitudes and behaviors, and how critically analyzing and questioning public opinion can lead to evidence informed policies.
The idea of a ‘common good’, that which benefits society as a whole, is also important to consider when examining criminal background disclosure requirements in higher education. Common good is rooted in the public interest perspective, which asserts that regulatory policies are enacted to protect citizens’ rights and often focus on the protection of citizens who are not able to protect themselves (Biggerstaff, 2000). The idea of a ‘common good’ is the bedrock of public opinion supporting restrictions for returning citizens. When examined through the common good lens one could make the argument that restricting access to the social work profession is justified. Social workers often work with vulnerable and oppressed populations, helping people to improve their functioning both individually and in communities (Morales & Shaefor, 1999). Limiting returning citizens’ access to social work education and licensure, and therefore professional access to vulnerable populations, would appear a clear and honest effort to promote common good and protect social work clients from increased risk of harm.

However, the justifications supporting restrictions are rooted in the public opinion that returning citizens are more likely to put clients at risk of harm than their non-offending peers (Leedy & Smith, 2005). Such justifications do not promote critical analysis of the issues but instead support the enforcement of unsupported restrictions. Unsupported restrictions are harmful because they perpetuate the belief that an entire segment of the population, i.e. returning citizens, are less than and therefore should be policed more closely than others. Most importantly, they do not allow for differentiation within the returning citizen population. For example, unsupported restrictions do not incorporate differing recidivism rates or risk-of-harm rates. Further, there may be evidence that support restrictions for specific convictions that are currently not part of public health codes or MSW admissions processes.
The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) states that social workers also have a responsibility to the broader society. Specifically, social workers are called to political action “which ensures that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully” (NASW, 2008, p. 27). Based on this charge, the social work profession has been very active in advocating for the rights of returning citizens, specifically in regard to access to employment. These factors show that there are also strong justifications that refute restrictions, creating a complex and inherent ethical dilemma for the social work profession.

Stigma and Labeling Theories

Stigma and labeling theories offer a theoretical framework for this dissertation. Stigma theory states that people manage “whether, how, and when they convey information about their “spoiled identities” (Opsal, 2011 p. 138). Stigma allows communities to exclude individuals based on the belief systems that perpetuate the stigma (Wheelock, 2005). Individuals are stigmatized because of their criminal histories. They are denied housing, employment, and access to financial aid because of their criminal background. It is this stigma that perpetuates the public belief that restricting access to social work education and licensing based on criminal background decreases the risk of harm to social work clients (Vliek et al., 2016; Wheelock, 2005). The literature review failed to find any evidence that the criminal offences listed in the Michigan public health code, public health licensing restrictions, or MSW admissions policies put people at a greater risk of harm.

Many polices are implemented because of public opinion. However, when the underlying assumptions supporting those policies are proven false then those policies are changed. Public opinion may guide the development of policy, but facts should support and
maintain policy. If facts support public opinion then policies should be implemented, but if they don’t then public opinion should be challenged, and policies should not be enforced.

Current research in labeling theory is starting to incorporate such concepts as cumulative disadvantage, differential effects of labels, and negative or positive associations with said labels based on race (Grattet, 2011). Cumulative disadvantage is “consistent with broader perspectives on structural racism that suggest patters of disadvantage evolve over time and may become institutionalized in organizational norms and decision-making routines” (Kutateladze, Andiloro, Johnson, & Spohn, 2014, p. 520). Cumulative disadvantage is important for this study because many who are impoverished, or a member of a marginalized community are at greater risk for a criminal conviction (Grattet, 2011).

Research on cumulative disadvantage, specifically in the criminal justice system, is growing. In the criminal justice system disadvantage is considered cumulative when racial minority defendants experience more severe outcomes than their Caucasian peers due to the cumulative impact of decisions made at multiple interaction points within the case proceedings (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; Hagan, 1974; Schlesinger, 2007; Spohn, 2009; Stolzenberg, D’Aessio, & Eitle, 2013; Sutton, 2013). One groundbreaking study examined the impact of cumulative disadvantage in the New York County court system. This study examined disadvantage at multiple points in the system, including case acceptance, pretrial detention, case dismissal, custodial plea offers, and incarceration sentence (Kutateladze et al., 2014). This study found evidence of cumulative disadvantage on African Americans and Latino Americans. For example, the study found that African Americans were 48% more likely to be detained upon arrest than Caucasians (Kutateladze et al., 2014). African Americans were also 30% more likely to receive a custodial plea offer which is a plea offer that includes incarceration (Kutateladze et
Kutateladze et al. (2014) stated that, when examining the disadvantage of African Americans, they could estimate that “361 additional Black felony defendants received the most severe combination of outcomes than would have been expected if they had been White” (p. 535). These individuals continue to experience cumulative disadvantage after they are released, including limited access to higher education.

Blanket policies which restrict access to the social work profession based on criminal disclosure, regardless of the crime committed or existing mitigating factors, is an example of cumulative disadvantage. The social work profession has institutionalized, within their educational system, the public opinions about returning citizens, thus increasing the cumulative disadvantage these individuals face. Many social work education programs state they require disclosure of criminal background to educate returning citizens about the impact their record will have on access to licensure and employment. It is important to educate individuals about the impacts of a criminal background, especially when it includes the cost of graduate education.

However, the social work educational community has not challenged the restrictions at the licensing level, nor is their evidence that they have researched the issue. Foucault says that we can learn by examining what is left unsaid as well as examining what is said. He calls this the dual problematic which is concerned not only with what the policy writers and developers say about the issue but also with what they are not permitted to say (Bacchi, 1999). It is important to recognize that public opinion and its impacts on social work admissions and licensing has, historically, been left unquestioned in the literature. This passive unquestioning has allowed public opinion to impact policies and practices which increase the cumulative disadvantage that returning citizens face.
Returning citizens who attend MSW programs must manage their criminal history, both in class and in field placements (Brodersen, Switch, & Richman, 2009). There is an interesting study from Great Britain that addresses the impact of stigma on returning citizens in an MSW program (Madoc-Jones et al., 2007). The study details lived experiences of two students with criminal backgrounds. The students wrote of feelings of discrimination and exclusion by the social work programs they attended (Madoc-Jones et al., 2007). One student was refused an internship because of her dishonesty conviction, a conviction that is similar to a fraud conviction in the U.S. judicial system. The second student felt discriminated against in the classroom, stating that an instructor disclosed her criminal background to the class. The study had a very small sample size and cannot be generalized. However, it does support further research on the topic.

Halkovic and Greene (2015) conducted focus groups with 37 students who were formerly incarcerated. Two MSW student participants clearly communicated their feelings of wearing stigma in the classroom. The first stated:

I think that entering a classroom as a person who if formerly incarcerated, you automatically feel different. You feel that you’re different than everybody else and you do wonder about the other students where they’re at and if they can actually tell that you are formerly incarcerated. It’s like you wear it like an invisible coat – and you feel it and you wonder if anyone else can see it and tell. (p. 769)

The second MSW student stated:

I wish it was direct – if it is direct, I know where I stand. I never interacted with anyone who directly discriminated against me. It’s the body language that changed [tightly up] – and now you’re sitting across the room – or you lost my e-mail address and we are
working on a group project. (Field note from panel discussion at screening of Passport to the Future, 2012). (p. 770)

Both statements drawn clear pictures of the experiences of students in MSW and support the need for further research on the topic.

**Michigan Public Health Code Act 368 of 1978, Section 333.16221**

The Michigan Public Health Code Act (MPHCA) of 1978 section 333.16221 lists the offenses that can trigger review or denial of licensing for all health care professionals, including social workers. MPHCA is important to examine because social work educators often site licensing restrictions as one of the justifications for requiring criminal background disclosure at the time of application. MPHCA was originally written in 1978 and requires all health care professionals applying for an initial license to undergo a criminal background check. A board consisting of eleven senators and representatives and twelve citizen members drafted the original MPHCA. There is evidence that some health care professions were included in this group, at least one dentist and one nurse were on the board. However, there was no record in the historical documents of the inclusion of public health care recipients or returning citizens, two primary stakeholder groups.

MPHCA lists criminal offenses that can trigger further review or denial of an initial license. These offences include high court misdemeanor; misdemeanor involving illegal delivery, possession or use of a controlled substance; felony; criminal sexual conduct in the first, second, third, or fourth degree; second or subsequent offenses of criminal sexual conduct; assault with intent to commit criminal sexual conduct; buying, owning, or selling animals for fighting or baiting; misdemeanor or felony involving fraud related to collecting of fees for a health profession; intentionally engaging in human cloning; obtaining, possessing, or selling controlled
substances including prescription drugs; selling fake medication; and participating in an illegal abortion, abortion without consent, or partial birth abortion (Michigan Legislature, 1978). MPHCA does not explain how they manage criminal offenses that are not on this list. Further, not all these crimes are associated with high recidivism rates and MPHCA does not provide supporting evidence for their exclusion. However, they could provide supporting evidence for their policies.

An in-depth analysis of two distinct types of offenses, drug and alcohol offenses and fraud/forgery offences, highlight the difficulty with the current restrictions. Drug and alcohol related offenses show that mitigating factors must be considered during the review. If a returning citizen does not complete a treatment program his/her risk of recidivism is roughly 38%, however if s/he successfully completes a treatment program his/her risk of recidivism drops to around 23% (Sung & Belenko, 2005, Ronan et al, 2009). In fact, if a returning citizen previously convicted of a drug/alcohol related offense has not re-offended in seven years that individual’s chances of committing another crime are not statistically different from their non-offending peers (Bushway, Nieuwbeerta, & Blokland, 2011; Kurlyckek, Brame, & Bushway, 2006).

However, the literature clearly shows that recidivism rates for fraud steadily increase over time. One study found that recidivism rates for fraud/forgery increased from 42% at one-year post release to 77% at five years’ post release (Durose, Cooper, & Snyder, 2014; McNeil, 2010). The MPHCA only includes fraud related to health care fees, however it does not outline how it handles all other fraud charges. If the justification for review is to protect clients from harm, it stands to reason that a crime which has increased recidivism rates over time, should be included in MPHCA and perhaps flagged for further investigation based on empirical evidence.
Higher Education Institutions’ (HEIs’) Policies

Vivian Nixon, executive director of College and Community Fellowship, states that the role of HEIs is to promote access to higher education saying, “they exist so that people from all different backgrounds - economic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and races - can have access to the things they need.” (Halkovic & Greene, 2015, p. 764). However, HEIs have policies that negatively impact a returning citizen’s ability to access graduate and undergraduate education. Over 74% of four-year institutions collect and use criminal background information at the time of application for undergraduate studies (Rosenthal et al., 2015). Policies can vary from supportive to restrictive, however they all require returning citizens to disclose their criminal background. It could be speculated that asking about criminal background at the time of application adds to the cumulative disadvantage experiences by returning citizens. It could also be assumed that asking triggers thoughts related to the stigma individuals’ face and impacts how they choose to manage that stigma; including applying to HEIs.

There is some evidence in the literature that asking about criminal backgrounds impacts returning citizens’ behavior. In a study conducted by The Center for Community Alternatives (Rosenthal et al., 2015) 62.5% of returning citizens did not complete the application for college (including community colleges) once they reached the question about criminal disclosure. For everyone returning citizen who was denied admission 15 did not complete the application. This data has large implications for access to education.

Social Work Profession

The social work profession is unique among health care professions because of its values and ethics, set forth in various codes of ethics, and the enforcement of those values and ethics through licensing. There are many codes of ethics for the social work profession; the
International Federation of Social Workers Statement of Ethical Principles, Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, The British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics for Social Work, The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, The National Association of Black Social Workers Code of Ethics. They have many things in common, but the most important is that they are all rooted in the eradication of social and economic injustice, self-determination of individuals and communities, and support of and advocacy for marginalized communities. In the U.S., social workers are held to the NASW Code of Ethics during their MSW program matriculation and when licensed.

The NASW Code of Ethics outlines the values and ethical principles that social workers in the United States follow in the practice of the profession (NASW, 2008). The code states six core values, three of which, social justice; dignity and worth of the person; and integrity, are relevant to this dissertation. Further, the code outlines ethical standards regarding responsibilities to clients, the profession, and the broader society, which should impact the professions response to educational restrictions.

For most social workers, social justice is the bedrock of the profession. Social justice is defined as “the exercise of altering, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions, among other forms of relationships.” (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002, p. 162). Regarding social justice, the code states “social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice” (NASW, 2008, p. 3).
Returning citizens experience social injustices such as restrictions in housing, educational loans, participation in government, and certain types of employment. Social work has been active in advocating for the rights of returning citizens in many arenas. This is one way that social workers practice the core social work value of *dignity and worth of the person*. The code outlines this value saying that social workers “. . . seek to enhance clients’ capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs” (NASW, 2008, p. 3). For many social workers, this translates into advocating for and with individuals and groups in mezzo practice arenas such as agency policies, and macro practice arenas such as professional, state, and federal regulations.

The restrictions placed on returning citizens are at both the mezzo practice arena, HEIs’ individual policies, and the macro practice arena, professional and state regulations. When social work educators engage in research and scholarship regarding these restrictions they are actively applying the NASW Code of Ethics. However, when leaving restrictions unquestioned, social worker educators are passively perpetuating these social injustices within the social work profession.

Social workers take professional integrity very seriously. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) states:

Social workers are continually aware of the profession’s mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social Workers act honestly and responsibly and promote *ethical practices* on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated (emphasis added) (p. 6). Professional integrity is a delicate balancing act between personal and professional values and professional obligations to individual clients, the profession, and broader society. The balancing
act between clients, the profession, and the broader society is most relevant to this work. Social workers must draw on their professional integrity when balancing the sometimes conflicting but always present responsibilities to clients, the profession, and broader society. This is an especially difficult task for social work educators who must balance these conflicting obligations while also guarding the first three gates of the profession; entry, education, and graduation (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010).

The NASW Code of Ethics preamble discusses this conflict and clearly states that no particular ethical value or standard outweighs another, and that care should be taken when they conflict (NASW, 2008). Therefore, the ethical responsibility to the individual client cannot outweigh the ethical responsibility to society at large, and the ethical responsibility to society at large cannot outweigh the ethical responsibility to the individual client. Social workers are as obligated to advocate for the rights of marginalized communities, fulfilling their ethical obligations to society at large, as they are to protect the rights of individual clients. This creates a clear ethical dilemma for social workers. Social workers face many situations where they cannot equally balance the rights of an individual client and the rights of society at large. These situations force social workers to choose between individual rights and societal rights. As social workers, we must remain diligent in managing this dilemma carefully so that individual and societal rights are equally valued and protected (NASW, 2008).

Social work is also unique because of the gatekeeping role of the profession, which calls on social workers to protect both current and future social work clients from harm and to bolster public trust of the profession (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). This agrees with two of the four rationales that support restrictions based on criminal background: to bolster public trust of the profession, to enhance client safety, to evaluate a student’s ability to gain licensure, and to
minimize liability (Dickerson, 2008). It is also done because social work educators often feel obligated to inform students of the impact a criminal history may have on access to the profession; for example, it may limit some field placement opportunities, employment opportunities, and licensing opportunities. Ideally gatekeeping allows the profession to maintain rigorous standards which uphold the values and ethics of the profession while also allowing those best suited to the profession access to education and licensure (Grady & Grady, 2009).

There is widespread agreement within the social work profession that educational programs, especially MSW programs, should act as gatekeepers to the profession (Reynolds; Ryan, Habbis, & Craft, 1997; Ryan, McCormack, & Cleak, 2006; Moore & Urwin, 1990). In fact, social work educators “are responsible for the first three gates of the profession: entry, education and graduation” (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010, p. 87).

Gatekeeping is a topic that social work educators have been discussing and researching for many years (Reynolds; Ryan, Habbis, & Craft, 1997; Ryan, McCormack, & Cleak, 2006; Moore & Urwin, 1990). In 1971 the Allenberry Colloquium said that educators are gatekeepers whose “responsibility it is to allow through the exit gate those who have demonstrated that they have become competent social workers.” (Moore & Urwin, 1990, p. 114). The gatekeeping literature generally supports and expands on this statement; focusing primarily on admitting, educating, and graduating competent and ethical social workers (Ryan et al., 1997; Ryan et al., 2006; Reynolds; Moore & Urwin, 1990). Unfortunately, very little of the gatekeeping research mentions criminal history as an issue that impacts incoming students or the profession (list ones that do here).

Social work educators execute the gatekeeping role at the first gate of the profession, entry, with admissions policies and practices. One gatekeeping tool they use is criminal history
reviews at the time of application into MSW programs (Leedy & Smith, 2005). The issue of restricting access to individuals with criminal background became more prominent in the 1990s. This was due in part to incidents of social workers with criminal backgrounds harming clients, both in England and the U.S. (Cowburn & Nelson, 2008).

However, social work educators have not shown that mandating blanket criminal background disclosures is an effective gatekeeping tool. Research has shown that consistent criminal screening can lead to social exclusion and decreased employment opportunities, and that criminal background checks are often inaccurate (Rosenthal et al., 2015; Cowburn & Nelson, 2008). Research has also shown that schools of social work are “significantly inconsistent” in applying criminal background reviews when making admissions decisions (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). For example, eight programs in Michigan ask about criminal backgrounds at the time of application but each programs policy is unique. Some programs rely heavily on an applicant's explanation of criminal history and the applicant’s demographics (Vliek et al., 2011) while other programs say the inability to find field placements is the main determining factor (Perry, 2004). This is important because of the social justice aspect of the issue. Promotion of social and economic justice requires social workers to advocate for fair and equal access to higher education for all individuals. Ethically justified and appropriate gatekeeping requires social work educators to be aware of the research and legal issues surrounding criminal backgrounds and recidivism (Cole, 1991).

Haski-Leventhal (2010) found that over 50% of MSW programs use a criminal background check during the admissions process and only 7% have established criterion in how to use the information. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) does not provide any published guidance about admitting, educating, and licensing individuals with a criminal
background. However, CSWE is required blanket criminal background disclosure on the common application system (CAS) for MSW programs. This could be a de-facto endorsement of restricting access to education based on criminal background, or it could be that CSWE wants to ensure individuals with a criminal background are fully informed of professional restrictions for social workers with a criminal background. Either way, more guidance from CSWE would benefit the discussion.

Non-academic standards play a key role in social work admissions (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). There is clearly a social justice-based philosophy within MSW programs that has a significant impact upon admissions decisions. These non-academic standards are often referred to as ‘fit to the profession’ criteria and include such things as personal values, work and volunteer experience, and criminal background (Vliek et al., 2015). Interestingly, the criteria MSW programs use to review criminal backgrounds are often in direct conflict with information found in recidivism research (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010; Vliek et al., 2016). For example, a study done in 2010 reflects that schools of social work consider “seriousness of offense” the most important mitigating criterion when determining admission status for applicants with a criminal background (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). However, this criterion is not supported by recidivism research as an effective predictor of future criminal behavior (Gendreau et al., 1996). MSW programs may be drawing upon their clinical experience in making these assessments. However, current research showing that clinical intuition and/or professional judgment are notoriously bad at predicting recidivism risk (Haski-Leventhal et al, 2010). It is very concerning that social work educators are making admissions decisions by relying on criteria that are either not supported by research or shown as ineffective by research.
Information on how to use and the appropriateness of using criminal background disclosures and criminal background checks in social work education is scarce. Using criminal background checks in admissions disproportionately impacts minority applicants. Duehn and Mayadas (1977) assert that “to be legal, admissions standards involving background checks need to contain specific ascertainable criteria and must avoid having a disparate impact on any protected classes of applicants.” (p. 20). This is a difficult charge given the well documented racism of the criminal justice system. How are social work educators supposed to ensure that criminal background disclosure policies don’t constitute disparate impact on racial minorities when the criminal justice system is racist?

Social work educators are not asking for or reviewing criminal background information in a consistent manner (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010; Vliek et al., 2011). Specifically, programs struggle with collecting the appropriate information and developing effective methods of evaluating the collected information (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). Because of the lack of research in the area programs are also unaware of the impact that criminal history reviews are having on admitted students (Brodersen et al., 2009).

Gatekeeping tasks must be clearly and explicitly stated. “In order to ensure legality of their decisions, social work educators must delineate specific, ascertainable admissions standards, as a basic requirement of equal protection under the law” (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010, p. 90). Policies regarding the screening of applicants with criminal backgrounds must be explicit; otherwise it leaves applicants with criminal backgrounds at risk of discrimination. Discrimination against applicants with criminal backgrounds is discrimination against many socially excluded (and therefore at-risk) populations (Madoc-Jones et al., 2007). The policies and standards should be based in research; balancing recidivism research, social work research,
the needs of the profession, and the values and ethics of the profession. Standards such as these protect the rights of students as well as current and future clients. They also hold to the professional values of justice and equality as they ensure that all students entering the profession are held to the same standards. Reamer (1999) outlines this as an ethical responsibility that social work educators have to applicants, students, and clients.

These policies have direct impacts on students when they are in programs. For example, one study found that government agencies, aging services, and private agencies were all much less likely to accept a student with a criminal background for internship than students without a criminal background. Further, agencies were less likely to accept male students with criminal backgrounds than female students (Brodersen et al., 2006). The following quote from Perry (2004) illustrates the issue well (p. 1006):

Despite the lack of a sound research base for decision-making, programme providers have devised selector guidance about what might constitute a problematic candidate offence profile; but this guidance is neither routinely published nor made available to candidates. There is no discernible evidence of a widespread public debate about what should constitute a problematic offending profile and, in any event, there may not be a universally acceptable one. Social work is diverse. Some agencies interest may be willing accommodate offense histories that others would want to avoid…For this reason, the application of a lowest common denominator offending profile could work against the human rights interests of some aspiring social workers and, more significantly, the users and agencies in need of their services.

In summary, when considering the social work ethics of human dignity, self-determination, and rehabilitation the following can be said: “…an individual is worthy of respect irrespective of
previous offending behavior, and whether s/he ought to be allowed to undertake social work training is as much about individual change as the nature of his/her offenses.” (Cowburn & Nelson, 2008, p. 298).

The Unique Gifts That Returning Citizens Offer HEIs

We must also acknowledge the rare and unique gifts that returning citizens can offer HEIs and helping professions, specifically social work (Rosenthal et al., 2015; Fine et al., 2001; Robins, 2012; Westin & Pettit, 2010). HEI students with criminal backgrounds experience a shift in their identity from knowing themselves as ‘convicted criminals’ to knowing themselves as ‘college students’. They carry with them many life experiences that can enhance the classroom experience for all students. Halkovic and Green (2015) outline the following specific gifts:

- deconstructing stigma/teaching the university; the desire to do more and give back;
- intimate knowledge of how systems work on the ground; and bridging relationships between the academy and underserved communities. Our evidence suggests that students with incarceration experience enhance the academic and civic environment of universities (p. 759).

There is also evidence that professionalizing specific deviant identities facilitates exiting deviance (Brown, 1991). 72% of U.S. drug and alcohol counselors are former abusers. Many of these counselors hold that their former deviant behavior is an advantage in their work and that it allows them to be better counselors. The professionalization of their former deviance has allowed them to gain purpose and quality employment. Roberta, a participant in Halkovic and Greene’s 2015 study, exemplified this idea when she said stated:
When I was released, I got my AA [associates in arts] and stated to work in the counseling field but that was not enough, so I now go to Fordham University for Social Work…. I am almost finished and my passion is to start a program up for those who are coming out of prison in reentry so that whatever their needs are I would be able to get them to their needs straight… (p. 773).

This professionalism also requires societal acceptance of the past deviant behavior and a society which honors redemption and second chances (Brown, 1991). Unger (2000) calls this *positive marginality*, the ability of an individual to move past the negative stigma associated with past behavior and embrace the marginality the stigma provides, incorporate it into their identity, and use this knowledge to help others and communities. One student stated:

> We [students with documented criminal records] have a way of challenging different paradigms. We get the tools to construct an argument that’s legitimizing acceptance in [underserved] communities in a language that’s acceptable at the academic level – at the academy. That’s the gift. We have tools – we have these weapons and we use them to challenge existing beliefs. (p. 775)

This statement supports Bell Hooks (1999) who states that we should see stigma as a “site of radical possibility, a space for resistance” (p.206), allowing for students who have been previously incarcerated to bring their lived experiences to HEIs and, by doing so, allow HEIs to witness and incorporate their value into the HEIs culture.

Halkovic & Greene’s (2015) study is important because it provides a new framework in which to view returning citizens, a framework that parallels the social work strength perspective. The study provides a different viewpoint on students lived experiences, showing that HEIs have a great deal to gain from purposefully including individuals who were formerly incarcerated.
They outline four gifts that these students bring to the HEIS: deconstructing stigma/teaching the university, the desire to do more and give back, intimate knowledge of how systems/policies work on the ground, and bridging relationships. One MSW student stated:

A lot of people who are formerly incarcerated go into human services fields; they have a deep sense of this is not enough. One student said:

So, I am working as a case manager and helping people but this is not enough. I am a mentor for College Initiative but that is not enough. I volunteer at that spot on the weekends but that is not enough. I am going for my CASAC but that is not enough. Because they feel that I owe this to myself, I owe it to my family, I have an understanding of what my role and position I society, in community and local level, at my agency, in my family. I know what my role is as a man, a husband, a father, and as a son. They have a deeper understanding of that … Men and Woman who are formerly incarcerated if they are on a campus are more than likely doing more than just being a student at that campus. (Halkovic & Greene, 2015, p.772-773).

This researcher agrees with McKnight and Block’s (2010) idea of ‘true community’ which supports that individuals with a criminal history have much to add to a community and should be fully embraced by said community, including HEI communities. Social inclusion of prisoners is good because it increased education and decreases recidivism (Crisp, 2009).

**Summary and Introduction of Chapter 3**

As is evident by this review, there is a gap in the literature that addresses the full implications of mandated criminal background disclosures on and MSW students. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics requires social workers to protect current and future clients from harm while advocating for self-determination and rehabilitation (NASW,
1998). Some of the people who social workers need to advocate for are potential students. Understanding the impact of these policies on the admissions experiences and the lived experiences of MSW students may help programs better understand how to mitigate this ethical dilemma.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

**Conceptual Framework**

The dissertation uses mixed methods phenomenological research (MMPR). MMPR incorporates quantitative and phenomenological methods in such a way as to increase validity, minimize bias, and enhance the strengths of each individual method (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). This dissertation uses the quantitative to phenomenology model which uses a “preliminary method from an alternative paradigm with priority given to the phenomenology” (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2013, p. 104). Stage I (preliminary method) consists of a mixed methods survey that will examine the ways in which returning citizen students experience MSW admissions policies and procedures. Participants in Stage I are any individual with a criminal background who started an MSW application, regardless of completion, admission, or attendance. Stage I findings were used to tailor the interview questions and format for Stage II. Stage II (phenomenological approach) consists of interviews with current and graduated MSW students who have a known (by their attending institutions) criminal background.

Phenomenology is often described as a philosophy, in and of itself independent of other philosophies. It is also a method of qualitative research rooted in post-modernism and existential philosophies (Finlay, 2011). Phenomenology is a post-modern epistemological perspective which acknowledges that the human experience is complex, and that these complex experiences are both objective and subjective, leading to a world experienced intersubjectively (Bevan, 2014). There are four core characteristics of phenomenological research; intentionality, initially descriptive research, phenomenological reduction, and the essence of the phenomenon must be articulated as the structure of the phenomenon (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). These
characteristics are the anchors of phenomenological work and serve as measures for validity and reliability.

There are various approaches to phenomenological research including interpretive, descriptive, and reflective lifeworld research. Many phenomenological approaches maintain the core characteristics of phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology, rooted in Husserl’s work, aims to describe the ‘essence’ of a phenomenon by describing the pieces of the phenomenon which are consistent in the descriptions given by those living it (Finlay, 2011; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixmith, 2013). In contrast, interpretive phenomenology aims to interpret individuals’ experiences of the phenomenon (Tuohy et al., 2013). The difference may seem minimal; however, they greatly impact methodology. For example, descriptive phenomenology uses bracketing, a process where researchers are strongly encouraged to put aside their previous understandings of the phenomenon of study (Creswell, 2007). However, interpretive phenomenology believes the researcher cannot put aside their previous understandings of the phenomenon and therefore allows the researcher to use some of his/her previous knowledge. Reflective lifeworld research as a phenomenological approach is neither strictly descriptive nor interpretive. It is an approach which allows for openness as it acknowledges that the researcher cannot completely put aside his/her understandings of the phenomenon. It is also rooted in sound epistemology and methodology by encouraging the researchers to bridle their understandings, a process where the researcher examines their own understandings of the phenomenon and controls for these understandings during data analysis. One way the researcher does this is to hire an expert in the phenomenon to review the bridling, therefore increasing rigor. As such, the Lifeworld Reflective Research approach was the natural fit for this dissertation (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom, 2008).
The Reflective Lifeworld Research approach also suggests that researchers utilize an expert reviewer in the phenomenon they are studying to help maintain bridling. The researcher hired an expert reviewer to review the survey questions for Stage I, her journaling, coding, and clustering for Stage II, and findings for both stages. The expert reviewer entered a Michigan MSW program with a known criminal background, participated in an interview process for admission to said program, and successfully matriculated from the MSW program. While serving as an expert reviewer he was also employed as a clinical substance abuse counselor.

Stage I consisted of an electronic survey which asked individuals who have started an application to a MSW program about their experiences when applying to MSW programs in Michigan. The purpose of this section was twofold: to gather information about the application process and to recruit individuals for Stage II. The survey was developed in consultation with the expert reviewer and consisted of 18 questions. Individuals answered questions about their criminal background, the application process, and their understanding of the criminal background policies of universities. They were also provided with an opportunity to volunteer for Stage II. The study received HSIRB approval from Western Michigan University.

Stage II consisted of interviews with current and graduated MSW students who entered graduate study with a criminal history known by their MSW program. The purpose of this section was to gain knowledge about the lived experiences of MSW students with a criminal history. The students interviewed reported their criminal histories during the application process to the MSW program they attended. There is very limited research on the impact admissions policies related to criminal histories are having on social work students’ experiences during their graduate studies. However, there is some evidence that suggests students with a criminal history are having unique experiences in MSW Programs. For example, students with criminal
backgrounds have reported experiencing discrimination in MSW programs (Madoc-Jones et al., 2007). Further, some preliminary evidence suggests that students with criminal histories are graduating from MSW programs at a much lower rate than their non-offending peers (Vliek et al., 2016).

**Participant Recruitment**

For the purposes of this study the admissions policies of all ten MSW programs in Michigan were examined: Andrews University, Eastern Michigan University, Ferris State University, Grand Valley State University, Madonna University, Michigan State University, Sienna Heights University, University of Michigan, Wayne State University, and Western Michigan University. Eight of the ten MSW programs require disclosure of a criminal background at the time of admission. The target study population for the survey was any individual who started the MSW application process at one or more of the eight Michigan university that require disclosure at the time of application. Potential study subjects were invited through social media or an email invitation (see Appendix A). A link to the survey was posted on Michigan Universities’ Facebook pages and the researcher’s personal Facebook page. Admissions offices at three universities sent an email invitation to all their current MSW students. All other Michigan MSW programs were contacted but did not respond. The e-mail invitation included:

- Study title and goal
- Names, affiliation & contact information of study investigators
- Study procedures (e.g., what is expected of study participants, including duration)
- Risks and benefits to study participation (including confidentiality)
- An electronic link to the QuestionPro survey site
The survey was anonymous, those wishing to participate followed the survey link embedded within the email to the site where they completed the survey. Participant were informed that by following the link to the survey site they were indicating their consent to participate and that they can withdraw by not submitting the survey. They were not asked for their signature on the consent to maintain confidentiality.

**Research Design: Stage I**

This study utilized a cross-sectional survey design; collecting data via anonymous electronic survey. The survey contained the following measures:

Table 1. Cross-Sectional Survey Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCEPT</th>
<th>MEASURES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application information</td>
<td>Disclosure required, impact whether applied, University or department application, application outcome, attendance, required interview, questions as interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of criminal background policies</td>
<td>Research done on programs, provided policy by department, reviewed policy, understood policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University and/or department policy, information given at interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential confounders</td>
<td>Size of university (Carnegie classification), size of SW graduate program, rural vs. urban university, public vs. private university, geographic region</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initially the survey asked informants to provide demographic information and detailed information about their criminal convictions. However, after consultation with the expert reviewer the researcher removed these questions. The expert reviewer suggested that these questions would greatly increase the probability of respondents dropping out of the survey. Returning citizen students are regularly required to disclose information about their criminal backgrounds, and they often experience discrimination related to this disclosure. The expert reviewer suggested that, in keeping with the strengths perspective of social work, the researcher should refrain from asking specific details about criminal background and allow informants to
decide if and what they want to disclose about their arrest and conviction history. The expert reviewer made this same argument regarding demographic information, suggesting that demographic information only be collected during Stage II. The researcher respected the expert reviewer’s feedback and made the appropriate changes.

Research Procedures: Stage I

Data was collected through the QuestionPro website survey program. The researcher used publicly available contact information to create the sampling frame of MSW programs within Michigan who mandate blanket disclosure of a criminal background during admission process and to identify the director (or appropriate contact person) within each program, along with their email address and phone number. The researcher attempted to contact each contact and ask them if they will be willing to send an e-mail invitation to the current student body. The researcher used the QuestionPro option “Not to save the email address or IP addresses” in the survey results to keep responses anonymous. Participants simply clicked on the link contained within the invitation email and were taken directly to the survey. The informed consent was the first page the survey. Participants gave consent when they started the survey. The survey took an average of three minutes to complete (see Appendix B). The survey was viewed 717 times. 54 individuals started it and 23 completed it, with a completion rate of 42.59%.

Duration of Study: Stages I and II

Participation in the study was expected to take between ten and twenty minutes for each participant, from reading of the email invitation / consent through completion of the online survey. If a participant volunteers for stage II this lengthened the duration of the study for this participant to approximately 3 total hours spread over three separate interactions. The survey opened on March 18, 2017 and closed on June 2, 2017. Data collection, in total, took eleven
weeks, from assembly of the sample to exporting of completed survey data. Data analysis and dissemination of findings took an additional seven months, for total study duration of ten months.

**Data Analysis: Stage I**

Data was downloaded from QuestionPro and imported into SPSS for statistical analysis. The data was free of any identifiers, except for the institutional descriptors gathered in the survey question responses. Individuals who wished to participate in stage II provided contact information within the stage I survey. Data was analyzed in aggregate, therefore an individual participant’s answers to questions (although anonymous) was not analyzed or presented.

Answers to demographic questions, which are potential identifiers, are presented in aggregate. Frequency tables of demographic variables were produced and analyzed by the researchers. None of these variables were confounding variables.

Unfortunately, there were no survey participants who did not complete their MSW application. Therefore, the researcher was unable to answer the following research question: Are applicants less likely to complete the MSW application if they must disclose criminal background?

**Research Design: Stage II**

Stage II used the Reflective Lifeworld Research phenomenological approach (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Reflective Lifeworld Research is a qualitative research approach based on phenomenological philosophy (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The purpose of stage II is to understand the lived experience of graduate school as experienced by MSW students with a known criminal history. Creswell (2007) says “phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.” (p. 57). In this case the
The phenomenon is the MSW student’s experience of attending a graduate school where the educators are aware of his/her criminal history. Creswell also says that the “type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon.” (p. 60).

The researcher interviewed students who entered MSW programs with a known criminal history from four MSW programs in Michigan; universities A, B, C, and D. The researcher conducted in-person individual interviews with participants, except for one participant who asked to be interview via phone. The interviews were semi-structured and took between fifteen minutes to one and a half hours to complete. The researcher had general questions that all participants answered, and probing questions were included when needed. However, participants lead the interviews and controlled what information they disclosed.

Interview questions were based on a general outline of the research topic and guided by the specific research questions (Hayes & Singh, 2012). In this case, the general questions consisted of understanding the lived experience of MSW students with a known criminal history. Questions included in the outline were:

- Basic demographics
- Detailed information about criminal history, offense, sentence, when occurred.
- How did the program come to know of the criminal history?
- What was the process of disclosing like for the participant?
- How does the participant feel the criminal history disclosure impacted their educational experience?

However, after consultation with the expert reviewer the researcher removed two of these questions: demographics and detailed information about criminal history. The expert reviewer
suggested that these questions would greatly increase the probability of respondents dropping out of the survey. Returning citizen students are regularly required to disclose their demographic and criminal background information, and they often experience discrimination related to this disclosure. The expert reviewer suggested that, in keeping with the strengths perspective of social work, the researcher should refrain from asking these questions. The expert reviewer, suggested that this information only be collected during Stage II. The researcher respected the expert reviewer’s feedback and made the appropriate changes. The draft interview protocol can be found in appendix D.

**Participants/Setting: Stage II**

Participants in stage II was a convenience sample from stage I participants. 21 of the 23 participants who completed the survey volunteered for stage II of the study. The researcher called all interested participants, followed the scripted conversation (appendix C) to determine eligibility. Some participants did not return phone calls or e-mails, and some participants did not fit the eligibility criteria. The researcher scheduled and conducted interviews until saturation was reached.

Ultimately nine informants were interviewed for the dissertation. Six informants were male and three were female. Five informants were current students at the time of their interviews and four had graduated. Two informants each were from universities A, B, and D; three were from the university C. The researcher attempted to conduct interviews with survey participants from other Michigan universities but was not able to do so.

**Research Procedures: Stage II**

Data was collected during eight in-person interviews and one phone interview. The researcher conducted interviews at a comfortable place as determined by the participant and
made sure that the location ensured confidentiality. The researcher audiotaped the interviews. The researcher offered to use pseudonyms during the interviews, however all participants preferred to use their actual names. The researcher reviewed the consent form (as approved by the HSIRB) with participants before conducting the interview.

Reflective Lifeworld Research requires researchers to bridle their pre-understandings of the phenomenon of interest prior to collecting data (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Bridling is the process of moving between the pre-understandings of the researcher and the information about the phenomenon that is presented during the research. Bridling before, during, and after data collection allows the researcher to maintain scientific rigor during the data collection process. Pre-understandings are historical understandings of phenomenon that each individual brings to the research and have cognitive, social, and emotional aspects (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The researcher journaled before starting the interviews. This allowed the researcher to fully explore her pre-understandings of the phenomenon before starting interviews for stage II. The researcher also journaled during, and after data collection for stage II to maintain the scientific rigor of bridling. Lastly, the expert reviewer in the phenomenon to review her journals, code definitions, coding, and results to maintain the rigor of the bridling.

**Data Analysis: Stage II**

Data analysis of the interviews was consistent with the Reflective Lifeworld Research approach to research. All interviews and hand-written notes taken by the researcher were transcribed by a hired professional transcriber. Lifeworld research requires a tripartite structure where researchers examine the whole, developing clusters (parts), and then re-examining the whole (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The researcher became familiar with the transcripts as individual wholes and as a collective whole. The researcher then coded the data for clusters, consistently
checking her pre-understandings while coding and using her expert to maintain rigor. After initial clusters were identified the researcher reviewed the transcripts for additional clusters. After additional clusters were identified the researcher again sent the code definitions and cluster quotations to her expert for review and monitoring of her pre-understandings.

**Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

There are some limitations and ethical considerations regarding individual interviews that were addressed. The interviews were intrusive, asking for detailed personal information. The participants were, at time, hesitant to share some of the needed information (Hayes & Singh, 2012). The researcher has many years of experience with interviews involving intrusive questions during her clinical practice and utilized her professional experience in conducting interviews.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This dissertation uses mixed methods phenomenological research (MMPR) methodology with two stages (Green Carcelli, & Graham, 1998). Findings from the stage I and stage II are presented separately and then jointly in the chapter 4 summary. Findings from stage I are presented first. Findings from stage II follow stage I, using the Reflective Lifeworld Research approach presentation style. The dissertation answers the following research questions:

Stage I Research Questions

1. How did applicants who disclosed a criminal background at the time of application experience the MSW application process?

2. Did the applicant understand the university or department’s policies regarding criminal background disclosure?

Stage II Research Question

3. What is the lived experience of an MSW student who enters an MSW program with a criminal background known by the MSW program?

Demographic Information of Participants

The survey was viewed 717 times. 54 individuals started it and 23 completed it, with a completion rate of 42.59%. 27 applicants applied, were admitted, and attended Michigan universities, but only 22 reported what universities they attended. Of the 22 18.18% (4) attended university D, 18.18% (4) attended university B, 4.55% (1) attended university E, 27.27% (6) attended university C, and 31.82% (7) attended university A.
Stage I Findings

3. **RQ1**: How did applicants who disclosed a criminal background at the time of application experience the MSW application process?

62.90% of survey respondents (22 of 35) researched if they had to disclose their criminal background on the MSW application before applying. Of those 22, 72.73% (16) stated it did not impact their decision to apply and 86.36% (19) stated that the required disclosure did not impact their decision of where to apply. 31.25% (5 of 16) made statements that they felt the admission process was punitive in nature. Regarding the 6 informants who stated that disclosing did impact their decision to apply; 4 called programs to ask about requirements and 1 asked the MSW program/university for a copy of the criminal background disclosure policy.

Disclosing a criminal background is different than a background check. Background checks often require documentation showing all the convictions and sentences a person have received. 75% (24 of 32) reported that a criminal background check was required as part of the application process. Regarding fees associated with the criminal background check: 29.17% (7 of 24) reported they paid fees, 33.33% (8 of 24) reported the department/university paid fees, and 37.5% (9 of 24) reported there were no fees. 53.85% (14 of 26) reported they were provided with a copy of the criminal background disclosure policy. When asked if they thought their criminal background impacted their admission decision the majority, 68% (17 of 25) felt it did not.

Less than half, 45.45% (15 of 33), reported they had to participate in an interview as part of the criminal background disclosure process. 11 of the 15 reported who interviewed them: 54.55% (6 of 11) were interviewed by Admissions & Student Services staff, 27.27% (3 of 11) were interviewed by faculty members, 1 individual was interviewed by the director and 1
individual was interviewed by a field liaison. Applicants were asked if they were asked the following 13 interview questions:

Table 2. Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>% Required to answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are your offenses?</td>
<td>58.33% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How old were you at the time of your first offense?</td>
<td>25% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How old were you at the time of your last offense?</td>
<td>25% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long ago was your last offense?</td>
<td>58.33% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your sentence?</td>
<td>41.67% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you successfully complete your sentence?</td>
<td>50% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you currently on probation or parole?</td>
<td>58.33% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do any of your friends/family have a criminal background?</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has your life changed since your last offense?</td>
<td>50% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were others physically harmed during your criminal acts?</td>
<td>8.33% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were your offenses drug of alcohol related?</td>
<td>41.67% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you clean and/or sober? (not using alcohol or drugs)</td>
<td>25.0% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If so, how long have you been clean or sober?</td>
<td>25.0% (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RQ2: Did the applicant understand the university or department’s policies regarding criminal background disclosure?

25 participants answered the question “Were you provided with a copy of the criminal background disclosure policy for the MSW program you applied to?” 56% (14) stated they were supplied with a copy of the policy. Participants were asked to explain in their own words the criminal background policy of the MSW program they attended. 11 participants answered the
question. One participant answered “unsure”. Four participants answered the question by stating what they had to do. For example, one participant wrote “I had to attach a letter of explanation” and another participant wrote “I was required to check a box stating that I had been convicted of a crime and sign a form indicating a release of criminal background information to the school. The form stated that criminal history would be reviewed by admissions committee.”

Seven participants addressed the MSW programs policy in their answers. Three participants focused on the implications for field placement. For example; one participant wrote “they also informed me that my background could have an impact on my field education”. Two participants shared contradictory information about the NASW Code of Ethics; one stated “lack of full disclosure could violate the NASW Code of Ethics and prevent candidacy” while another wrote the school has a “belief in rehabilitation as part of the NASW Code of Ethics”. One participant wrote “I honestly don’t remember what it stated. Possibly that I am aware of my charges and that [university] takes no responsibility for what I have done in the past.”

Nine of the eleven participants who answered the question stated what university they attended; 3 attended university A, 2 attended university B, 2 attended, university C, 1 attended university D, and 1 attended university E. The researcher compared the participants’ answers with the actual policies for universities A, B, and C. All of the participants had a general understanding of one part of their universities policy. However, none of the participants explained their university’s policy in full.

**Stage II Findings**

21 of the 23 participants who completed the survey volunteered for stage II of the study. The researcher called all interested participants, followed the scripted conversation (appendix X) to determine eligibility. Some participants did not return phone calls or e-mails, and some
participants did not fit the eligibility criteria. Ultimately nine informants were interviewed for the dissertation. Six informants were male and three were female. Five informants were current students at the time of their interviews and four had graduated. Three were from the university C; two informants each were from universities A, B, and D. The researcher attempted to conduct interviews with survey participants from other Michigan universities but was not able to do so. The researcher scheduled and conducted interviews until saturation was reached.

55.56% (6 of 9) of participants were male and 44.44% (3 of 9) were female. 66.67% (6 of 9) of participants were Caucasian, 11.11% (1 of 9) were Latino, 11.11% (1 of 9) were Asian, and 11.11% (1 of 9) were African American. The mean age of participants was 36. 66.67% (6 of 9) of participants disclosed that they were in recovery, two participants run the campus recovery programs at their universities. 33.33% (3 of 9) of participants graduated from university C, 22.22% (2 of 9) attended or graduated from university D, 22.22% (2 of 9) attended university B, 22.22% (2 of 9) attended university D. Demographics of the participants are reported in table 3:

Table 3. Stage II Informant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>In Recovery</th>
<th>Current student?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Lifeworld Reflective Research the data is first examined as a whole, then the researcher identifies clusters within the data, codes for the clusters, and lastly re-examines the
data as a whole. The researched followed these steps in identifying the clusters and essences of the phenomenon.

RQ3: What is the lived experience of an MSW student who entered the MSW program with a criminal background known by the MSW program?

**Initial Review of the Whole**

The majority of participants, 66.67% (6 of 9) reported that their criminal background significantly delayed their admission decision into MSW programs. This had major implications for participants including waiting a year to attend, denial of financial aid, and lack of access to preferred internship placements. All participants had offenses related to drug and alcohol use. Most participants, 66.67%, reported that they were in recovery and that their criminal background was directly related to their past drug and alcohol use. Participants who reported positive experiences during the admission process and as a student were more likely to report a positive integration of their criminal background into their self-concept. These informants were able to identify their own positive life changes that were related to their past active addiction and criminal offenses. This integration motivated informants to choose social work as a profession and helped them remain committed when barriers occurred.

**Identifying Clusters Within the Data**

The following codes emerged during the clustering phase of data analysis:

- **Addiction** quotations from informant who are in recovery and the intersectionality of their recovery, criminal background, and experience as a student
- **Belief in inclusivity** quotations that show the profession’s belief in inclusion of all parts of a person
Chose disclosure quotations about when an informant chose to disclose their criminal background in a classroom, field, or other arena

Delayed admission quotations disclosing the criminal background delayed admission into the MSW program

Discrimination quotations about informants experiencing discrimination in the program

Graduated quotations reflecting the informant graduated with an MSW

Integrated quotations that show informants have positively integrated their criminal background into their sense of self

Internal vs external quotations that show internalized shame versus external/societal shame and the intersectionality of them

Internship quotations associated with how the disclosure impacted their internship

Interviewed was the informants required to interview as part of the admissions process and comments on the interview

Licensing informants’ comments on impact on licensing

No discrimination quotations that reflect informants did not feel discriminated against by their program

Offense quotations reflecting the informants’ offenses

Privilege quotations about informants’ privilege that decreased impact of criminal background

Punitive process admissions quotations that reflect policies that focused on the stigma of a criminal background, extended the time for admission decisions, and required informants to share personal information about their lives

Punitive process in program quotations about informants’ experiences in their programs where informants expressed feeling punished because of their criminal background
Share records quotations reflecting if the informant had to share their arrest and conviction documentation with the university/program.

Stigma quotations that reflect stigma associated with background.

Strengths quotations that align with the strengths of returning citizens as outlined in literature.

Supportive process admission statements about the admission process that are supportive in nature.

Supportive process program statement about the program that are supportive in nature.

Treated statements about how the informant was treated while in the MSW program.

Who knew at your school quotations about what individuals in the program, faculty and students, knew about the informants’ criminal background when they were in school.

Written statement quotations about a written statement and if an informant was required to write one.

Co-occurrences of codes:

- 8 of the 16 quotes coded as ‘punitive admission process’ were co-occurring with the code ‘shame’
- 6 of the 11 quotes coded as ‘belief in inclusivity’ were co-occurring with the code ‘integrated’
- 10 of the 19 quotes coded ‘strengths’ were co-occurring with the code ‘integrated’
- 7 of the 13 quotes code as ‘delayed admission’ were co-occurring with the code ‘punitive admission process’
- 8 of the 16 quotes codes as ‘addiction’ were co-occurring with the code ‘strengths’

**Essences of the phenomenon application process was punitive.** Informants were much more likely to make punitive statements about the application process than about being a student.
in the MSW program. There were 26 quotations coded as punitive; 80.77% (21) of those quotes were related to the admission process and only 19.23% (5) were related to the student experience. Informants reported punitive events at multiple points during the admissions process. Joe reported withdrawing his application from his first-choice university because of intrusive questions and increased fees during the admissions process. He said:

> I ended up withdrawing my application at [university] after paying the fees and going through most of the process because I felt so discouraged with the amount of paperwork that they were having me file and track down and also having to set up certain interviews with people there.

Some universities require an interview for applicants with a criminal background. Informants reported some negative experiences related to the interview. Joe was required to participate in an interview at his first-choice university and ultimately decided not to attend because of his experiences during the application process. He explained the interview in the follow way:

> when I sat down with them I asked them what they thought my chances were at getting into this school you know, not related to academics or anything like that, just in general because I knew I had a very strong case for my academics and they said: “well we have let murderers into this school before” and I just didn’t like it. Comparing me to a murderer or someone saying something about someone who has committed a murder before. I don’t know; it wasn’t a good feeling. It wasn’t empowering, that’s for sure

Joe was not the only informant who reported negative experiences related to the interview. Sue stated the following about her interview process:
[university], that’s where I originally went to college—they asked me for an interview and funny story: I didn’t know that was why. I assumed they wanted to interview me because I was a 4.0 student but a girlfriend of mine was in the same position and they asked her for an interview and you talk about stigmatizing experiences, [pause] that was one of them. I was floored that that was the reason they were interviewing me . . . I felt [pause] as if the people were so condescending, and a lot of that might be my stuff, in fact my girlfriend didn’t know either that that is why we were chosen for interview. I remember the lady asked me at one point: “what can [university] do to help you be successful?” and I looked at her and I said, “You can grant me a full scholarship because I’m an excellent student. That’s how you can help me.”

Four informants reported that they needed to provide detailed documentation about their offenses to the university during the application process. Stan reported he had to disclose his adult record and “anything in juvenile cases so that was a little icky to me”. However, the other informants did not report positive or negative feelings associated with providing documentation. They made statements like “just different court records and outcomes and things like that”.

Finally, one informant experienced his acceptance letter negatively. Jim said the following about his admission letter:

I got an admissions letter, not from the School of Social Work but from the university that was really sort of shaming and it said: “we want to congratulate you. We are accepting you into the [university]” and to paraphrase it, it basically said: “even though the things you’ve done are really bad we believe in second chances and we are giving you one.”
Supportive experience for two informants. Not all the informants reported negative admissions experiences. Two informants had very positive experiences during their admissions process. These experiences are worth noting as they highlight how the admissions process can screen for criminal background while remaining rooted in social work’s strength-based philosophy. Bob had a very positive experience during his application process. He received support from his undergraduate institution and the MSW program he was applying to, and he reported that this support was one of the main reasons he completed his MSW application. Bob was very anxious about applying for graduate school and decided to talk about this with some of the faculty in his BSW program. He said the following about the support he received from one faculty member:

one of the professors from [BSW program] that I was really close with he told me that he also had a criminal background and his was a lot worse, I suppose, than mine. But he’s teaching at a university, so I mean there’s a lot of room for professional growth whether you have a history or not

Bob started his application to graduate school but was still anxious and decided not to complete his application. However, someone from the MSW program he was applying to contacted him and encouraged him to complete the application. Bob reported that this was very encouraging, and he ended up completing his application:

someone in the admissions office contacted me and told me that I should still apply . . . they ended up extending the deadline for me by two weeks, so I continued the application and I got in. So, yeah. I don’t really know if that had much to do with the criminal background on their end, but I just know when I was applying I had my apprehensions
about it and to me it felt like they were validating me like: “it’s okay, we’d still like you to apply” and I got in, so it was actually really great.

Stan is another student that had a positive experience during the admissions process. This was incredibly important to Stan because he had a very negative experience apply for college as an undergraduate student. Stan said the following about his undergraduate application process:

I had went through a lot more of an invasive and intimidating process at [university D]. . . . was a room like this, huge room, gigantic wood table, 15 people sitting around it, all questioning me about whether I was going to be a danger to campus, why I deserved a second chance, what exactly I did, and how I got to that place and what I’ve done since then

Conversely, Stan said that during his MSW admission process;

they let me know that they were interested in me being a student at [university C] school of social work but they had to find out more about me and more about my background in order for them to make a case for my admission to the larger university

Stan felt very supported during his admission process for the MSW program and reported that the process was redemptive, given his undergraduate experience, “it was a relief when I went to [university C]”.

Significantly delayed admission. Six of the nine informants reported that their criminal background significantly delayed their acceptance into the MSW program. This was something that informants talked at length about and reported as having a significant impact on their application and admission process. The impacts for students included a decrease in access to preferred internship placements, decreased access to scholarships, and delays in starting the
MSW program. Joe decided to attend his second-choice program because of the delayed admission at his first-choice institution. He reported the following about the admission process for his first-choice institution:

I applied before the early deadline, so I applied in November and I didn’t hear back until May that I was accepted and so what ended up happening for me was that I was accepted so late a lot of people had already been assigned their field placements. I was put at a huge disadvantage in terms of that and if there ever was any scholarship money available, at that point it was long gone. It took 6 months for them to approve my application.

Joe was not the only informant who reported that the delayed acceptance impacted his internship placement opportunities. When asked if her background impacted the internship process Sue said, “Well I was behind the eight-ball because my admission was so late”.

Kate was initially denied into the MSW program she attended because of the university process associated with applicants who have a criminal conviction:

I had everything in before the due date of the application and the day the applications were due they still hadn’t been updated. So, I called the registrar’s office again and they were like, “oh, it looks like there’s a hold on your account.” And they wouldn’t tell me why there was a hold on my account and they had to like transfer me to someone who told me that I had to talk to like a specific office manager, but he was out of the office till the following week. I couldn’t wait till the next week though you know, my application was due that day. Long story short finally they were able to disclose that the reason there was a hold on my transcript was because I had checked that box and I think the school of
social work had to sign a piece of paper saying that they understand I had been convicted of a crime and that they wanted to see my application anyways.

Kate had to complete the application process again the following academic year. Thankfully, she was aware of the procedure and started advocating for herself earlier in the process. She was able to secure admission, but the process was much longer for her than her non-offending peers. She said the following about her acceptance:

I got a letter from the school of social work saying that I had been admitted to the program but on my student portal it wasn’t showing that I was an admitted student until months later and some letter needed to be signed. So, it was very disjointed, and it was not—it didn’t work how it was supposed to work.

Stan also reported that his criminal background delayed his acceptance significantly. Initially he was denied university financial aid because all the funds had already been allocated. Luckily, Stand was able to advocate for himself and secure funding:

When I finally did find out it was like, “yay!” and then I got the estimated tuition and I was like, “okay I’m not going to be able to afford that” and then I got the rejection for any kind of financial aid and I’m like, “okay now I can’t do this because I can’t afford it.” So, I reapplied for financial aid because someone had told me that if you get denied apply again. So, I applied again and I had the executive director of [local non-profit] write a letter to the dean and she was happy to and I got a dean’s scholarship that covered half the tuition

Both Stan and Kate had to advocate for themselves in ways that their non-offending peers did not. Stan had to advocate to have access to university financial aid, and Kate needed to
advocate to have her application reviewed. There access to these services were limited because
they had to disclose their criminal background at the time of application.

**Positive experience as student.** Informants reported mostly positive comments about
their experiences as students in MSW programs. There was a total of 16 quotations coded about
the experience of being an MSW student with a known criminal background. 68.75% (11) of
those quotations were coded as positive and 31.25% (5) were coded as punitive. Many
informants commented on the difference between the admissions process and the student
experience. Kate summarized the difference well saying, “I think once I’d been in the program
people have been very kind and understanding”.

For many informants it was very important for them to receive support and
encouragement specific to their criminal background. Jim said, “I sort of appreciated at the time
that it felt like the School of Social Work was being an ally in the process and I appreciated
that”. Bob said:

> For me what was the best part about it was being able to open up to professors and talk
to them about my concerns career wise because as a student you’re going through school
and trying to learn what to do after school and this and that. Just being able to be open
about it and how it would impact my future goals was just really good. It’s something
that I enjoyed and definitely helped me figure out what I want to do.

Informants also spoke of positive experiences in classrooms with their peers. Bill felt
supported by his peers and appreciated that they saw his personal growth:

> very well just like everybody else I haven’t felt stigmatized or judged for it at all you
know. And I didn’t really expect it would be either – I think it is a different feel that
business or law – but I think that social workers are understanding you know what I mean
they care about each other. So I got a lot of complements about you know hearing my story from where you came from sleeping under a bridge 10 years ago steeling to get by to where you are now – they were like you know but now they tell me how much they look up to me for that

**Informants expected impact on internship experience.** Informants expected their criminal background to impact their internship experience. Most informants were informed at the time of admission that their criminal background could limit their opportunities for internship placements. Therefore, they were not surprised when they had to disclose to potential internship placements. They all acknowledged the impact their background had on the internship process, and the majority of them identified it as a significant barrier in their education experience. However, they also all stated that they were able to secure quality educational internship experiences.

Informants spoke openly about the barriers associated with the internship process. Informants spoke frequently about how their criminal background limits fields of practice for internship experiences. Bill stated, “this felony is holding me back because I couldn’t get a lot of internships I wanted to apply for would not take felons” and Sue reported, “I’m a pretty good self-advocator but at the same time I was very intimidated, and I went for where I was pretty sure in the scheme of things where I would be able to get a placement.”

Three informants felt they were pressured to do an internship placement in substance abuse field. Joe reported that his BSW internship placement, a substance abuse treatment center, tried to convince him that he would not be able to get an internship in a field other than substance abuse:
Actually, as a matter of fact I did my undergraduate internship there and they made it seem like it would be hard to get anywhere other than [agency] again but I was trying to do something else. I was trying to do mental health and a lot of other different things, but I actually ended up getting a really good placement.

Bill attended an MSW program in his own community, which was also where he lived when he was in active addiction and substance abuse treatment. This caused some intersectionality of his identities when Bill participated in an internship interview with a supervisor who had previously provided his substance abuse case-management services:

I was at [agency A] and I knew [Frank] he used to work at [agency B] and funny story back ten years ago when I was receiving services I was actually receiving services from [agency] and he was my case manager and now he is my field supervisor. So, I think just knowing him but he did say they had to do a background check, but the felony wasn’t there at that time. They didn’t care about misdemeanors just felonies or only certain kinds of misdemeanors no high court misdemeanors

Kate, who had experienced some severe impacts on her MSW education, became proactive with the internship process. She said, “last year I was kind of proactive about meeting with the field placement coordinator and telling her about my background because I didn’t want, at the last minute, it to become an issue”.

**Stigma is real.** Every informant made multiple comments regarding the stigma associated with a criminal background. Informants expressed experiencing stigma at multiple points in their educational experience. Informants experienced the greatest amount of stigma during the admissions process and while securing an internship. They also experienced stigma as students, as though not to the extent that they had expected.
One of the ways that stigma manifested for informants was in their anxiety about how their peers would think about them if they knew about their criminal background. Jeff shared that that the stigma impacted how he thought his peers would think about him, “I don’t share that when I’m talking to somebody …. like if people hear that they’ll think you’re pretty irresponsible”. Jim expressed concern for himself and others in recovery based on the following experience as a student:

The kind of stigma that happened in the School of Social Work was different. It wasn’t directly sort of oriented at me. The kind of stigma that you get there is more in classes where they are teaching people things that don’t necessarily—they are [chuckles] not necessarily lining up with the real world so, for example, … you hear people say negative things about 12-Step Groups like in classes and there are people sitting in their class that are part of those groups that are doing really well and you want social workers to be able to use those as referrals as needed, right?

Because of this type of stigma Jim felt he needed to hide his criminal background and his identity as a person in recovery:

I felt like I needed to keep it quiet because there was some shame, internal, and there was also the stigma that if you are a person in recovery somehow that’s all the qualification you have to be in this field or something and people are going to judge that somehow.

This experience is common for individuals in recovery, as expressed by Jim in the following statement, “advice I got from the older people was: “don’t talk about it, don’t disclose, keep it secret. There’s gunna be stigma and they’re gunna judge you…they’re gunna…. You’re better off not telling people.”
Stigma impacted some informants’ feelings of belonging, leaving them always afraid they were going to get ‘found out’. Joe summarized it well saying:

Basically, my background didn’t come up at all except when I brought it up during supervision—placement supervision because I was so scared all the time that they would yank me, to be honest . . . I was really, really afraid that they would figure out they made a mistake and yank me and start over somewhere else and go through the embarrassment of it. It was a very real fear for me.

Kate also made a powerful statement about belonging:

I always come in with a deficit. I come in having to prove myself like, I’m not who you think I am. I think in some ways maybe I have to work a little bit harder than the other students to just like be at the same level so I’ve just gotten used to the fact that these charges are something that I’m going to have to explain for the rest of my life so I’ve gotten used to explaining them. And that’s not really something other students have to do. … I’m going to be defined by the worst things that I’ve ever done for the rest of my life and I don’t even have it half as hard as the people who are like in prison for felony charges.

Sue also comments on this saying, “my feelings of discomfort, my moments of feeling inadequate and less than, that’s driven by society and by my own fear. I cannot recall an instance where I felt that a professor in particular…”.

Informants were also aware that they are going to carry their background with them wherever they go for the rest of their lives. This impacted how and when they decided to disclose to their peers. Joe was able to summarize this well:
One of the things for better or worse is look around the room and as you look around realize that you’re going to be looking at a lot of your co-workers and people that are going to be a part of your professional development and some of these people might be your boss someday. I think in the back of my mind at the time it would come back to haunt me in some kind of way.

Informants expressed this uncertainty of how their background would impact them and that it cannot be shed. When asked why she doesn’t like talking about it Pam answered, “Like even in my personal life, because there’s such a stigma to like what happened when I got arrested when I was 21. It stays with you wherever you go”

Stan summarized the experience of stigma well saying, “it’s like you are always going to be the person you were when you made the mistakes you made, and you are more likely to be that person again than anybody else”. This statement is in direct contrast with the social work value of self-determination and second chances.

**Intersectionality of recovery, integration, and positive self-concept.** The intersection of integration of life experiences, including recovery and criminal background, into a positive self-concept was a major theme in the interviews of informants specifically, informants in recovery. Five of the six informants who expressed that they had successfully integrated their criminal background into a positive self-concept disclosed they are in active recovery. Their ages range from 25 to 46, with a mean age of 35. Three of the informants were Caucasian, one Asian, one Latino, and one African American. Three of the informants were current students and three were graduates. Age, race, and student status did not impact the successful integration of their criminal background into their positive self-concept.
The same five informants who disclosed active recovery were also five of the seven informants whose interviews had co-occurrences between the codes strengths and integrated. This integration allowed informants to take their life experiences, use them to motivate themselves, and help them remain motivated when they faced barriers. The experiences they had, including their criminal behavior and convictions, are part of what motivates them to be social workers and remain committed to the work they do. Jeff was reflecting on a talk he gave in a class and shared the following:

I had my own history and shared what happened and ironically it led me to where I am today . . . I think like what better way to help someone get over their obstacle’s in life if you can understand them.

Jim was able to see the positive growth that he gained from his recovery, “my detox experience and being in recovery was part of sort of a strength for me”. Joe expressed that his recovery had increased his empathy, “I had done some work with substance abuse and that ended up being an asset because I could… it helped with my empathy”.

Two quotes from informants summarize well how the integration between recovery, criminal background, and positive self-concept can manifest in a desire to give back. Kate said:

as with so many people in recovery you know we kind of make it our mission to be in service every day. I think that is part of why I align so well with the social work profession; with the values and the mission and all

Sue, who identifies as a person in long term recovery said:

we tell our clients—we talk so much about hope, we are in these collaborative relationships and we walk beside people and we tell people life can be different and you
have the power to change the environment . . . That is one of the things that are different
about social work, it’s collaborative. We aren’t up here telling people what to do

**Informant who did not show positive integration.** One informant’s experience
highlights the impact a criminal background can have when an individual does not successfully
integrate her past into her self-concept. Pam struggled with talking about her criminal
background and minimized its impact on her educational experience. Pam made multiple
comments that reflect how she has internalized stigma and how it negatively impacted her self-
concept. The following excerpt from her interview reflects how she minimized the impact of her
criminal background on the admission process as well as how she minimized her offense by
comparing it to other offenses:

Q: Okay and how did [university D] come to know about your criminal background?
A: They didn’t. It wasn’t asked at all when I applied for school.
Q: Oh, okay.
A: I think it was but it wasn’t, like it didn’t make a difference as far as enrollment goes. It
was only for my program.
Q: So the university asked?
A: Just the program.
Q: So, why do you think it didn’t matter for enrollment purposes?
A: Uh, honestly because everybody deserves a chance to go to school. It wasn’t like a
drug related charge where it would affect my ability to get financial aid, so.

She said similar comments about her internship experience:

Q: Have you done any field experiences yet?
A: Yeah.
Q: Tell me about how it impacted your field process.
A: It hasn’t. Um, I mean it’s like it wasn’t even affected at all.
Q: Okay. Now is that because the place where you’re doing your internship doesn’t ask about criminal background or because it was irrelevant?
A: They did ask about criminal background because one of the things I had to do before the internship was to complete an employment application. It wasn’t anything that was necessarily relevant to why I was there.

She said she did not speak about her background because of embarrassment:

It’s not something I talk about because it’s obviously not something that people are proud of and like some people—I understand that’s part of their process and they are okay with like talking about it but I just don’t like to so…

This was true in her personal life as well as her identity as a student saying, “Like even in my personal life, because there’s such a stigma to like what happened when I got arrested when I was 21”.

Pam was not able to acknowledge the impact her criminal background had on her admission and internship process because she was focused on minimizing her criminal history. Pam was telling herself that her background does not define her, however she was incorporating that theme into her story in a very different way that other informants. She was incorporating it by minimizing her behavior, denying the impact it has on her future, and hiding that part of herself. This is in direct contrast to the informants who successfully integrated their past into their self-concept. They spoke of growth from their past, sharing their stories with peers so that other can learn, and accepting the gravity of their criminal background while not allowing it to hinder their educational pursuits.
The majority of informants were provided a copy of the MSW program’s criminal background policy, although informants did not state how they were provided with copies. The researcher did gather information on this from the universities. University A provides a copy of the policy after the initial review of the application, universities B, C and D stated the policy is available on the web-site for applicants to review but students are not provided a copy until orientation, and university C stated the policy is on the web-site and applicants must contact the Office of Student Services for a verbal explanation before submitting their application. Informants did not remember all the aspects of the policy but focused on one certain area. For example, one informant remembered specifics related to licensing and another informant remembered specifics related to internship possibilities. There are multiple explanations as to why informants did not remember the criminal background policy well. Perhaps too much time had elapsed between survey completion and application time, perhaps the details of the policy were not important to informants once they were accepted into the program, or perhaps informants purposefully forgot the information because of the stigma associated with their criminal background. Regardless, the researcher was surprised that informants did not remember the criminal background policies in greater detail.

**Findings Summary**

In general, informants expressed many more negative experiences during the admissions process than during their tenure as students in their MSW programs. Informants communicated that knowing what the barriers would be and getting support for managing those barriers made the experience much more manageable and supportive. Informants certainly recognized when universities were adhering to the NASW code of ethics and felt empowered when programs did so. As students, informants felt the greatest impact on their education was during the internship
placement process. However, they also expressed that they were able to manage that process well in large part because of support from their universities.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The exploration of the lived experiences of MSW returning citizen students offers a plethora of information for discussion. Findings support past research outlining the unique skill-set that returning citizen students offer higher educational institutions. Informants talked about deconstructing stigma by sharing their experiences in classrooms and helping their fellow students realize that individuals can change. Many informants stated they have a desire to give back to their communities because of their life experiences. They also were able to help HEIs and their fellow students understand systems that individuals with a criminal background interact with.

Findings highlight the unique experiences of returning citizen students in MSW programs, providing MSW programs with important feedback on the impacts of policies. Stigma is something that returning citizen students must learn to manage in their MSW programs, and informants explained in detail the impacts stigma had on them during the admissions process. The dissertation offers helpful insights for MSW programs who are developing policies that address returning citizen students.

Social work is a profession dedicated to the irradiation of social and economic injustice (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002). Informants expressed that the policies addressing returning citizen students are supportive when they are rooted in this belief and focused on the strengths that returning citizen students offer. Informants realize the importance of educating returning citizens on the impact their criminal background can have on their ability to practice as a master’s level social worker. Stan was able to articulate the difference between discrimination and barriers when he said he did not experience discrimination in his MSW program even though
he experienced barriers during the admissions process. This example supports the need to educate returning citizen students about the impact of their criminal background. It could also provide a blueprint that MSW programs can use for developing criminal background disclosure policies with the strengths-based model of social work. It is encouraging that informants were not discouraged from applying to MSW programs because they must disclose their criminal background. There is some research that shows alarmingly high (62.5%) attrition rates for higher education applicants with a criminal background (Rosenthal et al, 2015). This attrition rate is associated with undergraduate studies and therefore cannot be compared with graduate studies. However, it does provide justification for inquire about attrition rates at the graduate level.

There are many possible hypotheses as to why MSW attrition rates differ from undergraduate attrition rates. Perhaps simply knowing programs require disclosure is enough to ease anxiety associated with disclosing. Perhaps individuals applying for graduate education are better equipped to manage their criminal background identities than those applying for undergraduate education. This is an area for further research as more information may help higher education institutions develop admissions policies and procedures that do not hinder access to education for returning citizens.

The majority of MSW programs require applicants to disclose their criminal background at the time of application (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). CSWE is currently hosting a centralized application system (CAS) for MSW programs in the United States and hopes to have the majority of MSW programs enrolled in the CAS in the next five years. The CAS requires applicants to disclose their criminal background, which means there is the potential that within the next five years all MSW applicants will be required to disclose their criminal background.
Educators are aware of the impact this has on potential students (Crisp, 2009) and this study provides deeper insight into the impact of these policies on potential returning citizen students.

Admissions policies and procedures related to criminal background are important and have a tangible impact on potential students. Informants were consistent in their description of admissions policies and were able to delineate between punitive and supportive policies. Punitive policies were described as policies that focused on the stigma of a criminal background, extended the time for admission decisions, and required informants to share personal information about their lives. As one informant stated, “it’s like you are always going to be the person you were when you made the mistakes you made, and you are more likely to be that person again than anybody else”. Informants were also able to explain how the punitive policies reinforced the stigma associated with a criminal background. Specifically, informants were keenly aware that the increased time needed to review their application was a barrier because of decreased access to scholarship funding and lack of access to preferred internships.

Supportive policies were described as policies that explained the impact a criminal background could have on an informants’ access to internships and employment while remaining strength-based and rooted in self-determination. Informants were clear that supportive policies were redemptive and did not feel intrusive. This differentiation is important for MSW programs to recognize and utilize in policy development. Informants want support from MSW programs in managing their criminal background, and one of the ways programs can provide support is by educating individuals of the impact at the time of application.

The interview is an important part of the admission process for individuals with a criminal background. Previous literature indicates the vast majority of MSW programs, up to 95%, ask for an interview from returning citizen applicants (Haski-Leventhal et al, 2010; Vliek
et al, 2011). However, less than half of informants, 45.45%, reported having to participate in an interview process, either in person or on the phone. Interviews are important because they are used to determine admissions decisions for applicants with a criminal background. The type of information programs gather during these interviews is very important, as it guides their admission decision. It is also important because most MSW applications ask about criminal background, but the application does not ask for the specific information such as convictions, time since last offense, or successful completion of sentence, needed to determine eligibility. This information is gathered in a second screening process which usually involves an interview (Haski-Leventhal et al, 2010).

Literature supports that MSW programs ask about criminal background because of their gatekeeping role in social work education (Reynolds; Ryan, Habbis, & Craft, 1997; Ryan, McCormack, & Cleak, 2006; Moore & Urwin, 1990)). The gatekeeping role calls on social work educators to protect current and future clients from harm and to bolster public confidence in the profession (Barlow & Coleman, 2003). However, the social work-related information that MSW programs base admissions decisions on does not predict recidivism (Haski-Leventhal, et al, 2010; Vliek et al., 2011) and therefore is not an effective gatekeeping tool. This highlights a critical flaw in the justification for mandated disclosure; the use of non-empirical data to determine admission into MSW programs.

Previous research suggests that MSW programs base admissions decisions for returning citizen students on information that is not predictive of recidivism risk (Haski-Leventhal et al, 2010; Vliek et al, 2011). MSW programs base their admission decisions primarily on information associated with the social work profession, such as were the offenses drug or alcohol related, instead of information associated with recidivism rates, such as successful completion of
probation or parole (Vliek et al., 2011). MSW programs were asked what factors they use in determining admissions decisions for returning citizen applicants. Four of the top five rated factors; life changes, not committed crime in five years, hard to find internship, and drug and alcohol problems, were factors associated with the social work profession and not predictive of recidivism (Vliek et al, 2011). This is a critical piece of information because it highlights that MSW programs may not be using information that increases the efficacy of the gatekeeping role. Instead, the current review processes add to the cumulative disadvantage that returning citizen students face in accessing higher education.

In any discussion related to discrimination based on criminal background the idea of cumulative disadvantage must be explored. Based on the findings of this dissertation it can be hypothesized that the lived experience of returning citizen students supports that screening for criminal background, in its current form, i.e. lack of published review of empirical evidence to support policies, adds to the cumulative disadvantage that students face. It increases the time needed to review applications, decreases access to funding, and decreases access to preferred internships. It can also reinforce the stigma associated with a criminal background, especially during the admissions process.

Cumulative disadvantage has a greater impact on historically disadvantaged populations (Brodersen et al, 2006; Kutateladze et al, 2014; Nixon, 2013; Pager, 2003; Rosenthal et al, 2015). This is an important fact for schools of social work to consider. Social work educators often say that they must focus on recruiting students who are reflective of the populations social workers serve. This means that social work educations are often actively recruiting members of disenfranchised populations including African American men, individuals who have been impacted by addiction, individuals who have been impacted by trauma. Social work educators
must also consider the cumulative disadvantage associated with other historically
disenfranchised groups and how this cumulative disadvantage intersects with the cumulative
disadvantage associated with a criminal background. For example, race and poverty are both
contributing factors to cumulative disadvantage in accessing to higher education (Rosenthal et al,
2015). Therefore, minority applicants who have a criminal background experience a higher
degree of cumulative disadvantage than their Caucasian peers.

The stigma individuals feel is real and it permeates throughout the entire MSW
experience. However, informants clearly stated that they felt stigma more often and in more
punitive ways during the admissions process than during their tenure as MSW students.
Informants offered support for stigma and labeling theories when they discussed hiding their
criminal background status and recovery status from their peers. They contextualized the
experience of having a ‘spoiled identity’ when they explained the judgment they felt from their
non-offending peers (Opsal, 2011). Informants emphasized that this stigma is stronger in some
places than others, specifically outlining how it occurs in the admissions process. The
admissions process ‘outs’ returning citizen applicants to the MSW program, removing the
applicants’ ability to choose when and to whom they disclose. Returning citizen applicants come
to programs with apprehension and anxiety because of their history. Informants clearly outlined
that how MSW programs interact with them impacted how they viewed themselves and their
experiences as MSW students. They ask MSW programs to interact with them in ways that
decrease stigma instead of increasing stigma.

This dissertation supports past research about wearing stigma during the admissions
process and occasionally in the classroom, but it also highlights the many ways that faculty and
peers embrace and support returning citizen students (Halkovic & Greene, 2015). Informants
were willing to disclose and offer their life experiences as learning moments for their faculty and student peers. Peers were receptive and supportive of returning citizen students. This is beneficial for returning citizen students because it aids in the positive integration of their life experiences into their self-concept. It also supports past literature showing the returning citizen students offer a unique skill-set to higher educational institutions (Rosenthal et al., 2015; Robins, 2012; Westin & Pettit, 2010).

The literature review found that HEIs benefit significantly when they enroll returning citizens (Rosenthal et al., 2015; Fine et al., 2001; Robins, 2012; Westin & Pettit, 2010) and the informants provided many examples. The informants in this dissertation were keenly aware of the strengths they possess and the unique skill-set they have because of their criminal background. Halkovic and Green (2015) outline the specific gifts that returning citizen students possess including deconstructing stigma, teaching the university, increased commitment to giving back, intimate knowledge of how systems work, and bridging relationships between higher education and underserved communities. Informants deconstructed stigma when they spoke about their lives in classrooms. They taught faculty about the lived impacts of a criminal background on college students when they shared their experiences with their MSW programs and in MSW classrooms. They expressed deep and unwavering commitment to giving back to their communities. They shared details of how criminal justice system in classrooms and internships. Those in recover talked at length about the intersectionality of recovery, integration, self-concept and how that motivates them. In many ways, returning citizen students are the bridge between higher education and underserved communities.
Limitations and Strengths of the Dissertation

Fair and ethical treatment of students is a critical issue faced by all schools of social work. This dissertation explores the experiences of a student with a known criminal background and seeks to provide insight into the lived experiences of these students. This is one of the first studies in the U.S. to analyze the topic, hopefully providing a foundation for further study. This study justifies further research focused on helping social work educators understand the impacts of policies directed towards students with criminal backgrounds.

The study gives voice to returning citizen students. Many informants thanked the researcher for her work and for taking the time to document their stories. The sheer process of participating in the interviews was redemptive for most informants. The researchers did not develop this study using action research methodology, but they acknowledge and appreciate that it was able to provide a venue for returning citizen students to engage in the process of policy change and advocacy. The majority of informants asked to see the research when it was finished and talked about helping their current or former MSW programs develop better policies.

One significant limitation of this study is that it did not ask informants for details about their offenses and therefore the study cannot examine the offenses in relation to recidivism research. In other words, the researchers cannot calculate the risk of re-offending for any of the informants and therefore cannot address the issue of actual increased risk of harm to the public. This was outside of the scope of this project, but further research in this area is highly recommended by the researchers. This research should include the examination of criminogenic factors and their impact on an individual’s risk of reoffending. It should be noted that acquiring a higher education degree has consistently been shown to decrease recidivism. Social work
programs are decreasing recidivism simply by admitting, enrolling, and graduating individuals with a criminal background.

Generalizability is not an aspect of Lifeworld Reflective Research. Therefore, it was never the intention that this study be generalized to the returning citizen population. Instead, the researchers hope that it encourages further research to grow the body of literature related to the returning citizen students’ experiences in MSW programs. There were other limitations including social desirability and self-selection.

**Recommendations of Informants**

Informants were asked what recommendations they have for MSW programs. The researcher thought it was important to share all recommendations from informants. Bob recommended that programs remain non-judgmental and welcoming to prospective students with a criminal background when he said:

I mean I think it’s so welcoming and you know really just shouldn’t be judgmental. There shouldn’t be a fear for students who do have a criminal background to even just go through the program or connect with professors. One of the professors from [university D] that I was really close with he told me that he also had a criminal background and his was a lot worse I suppose than mine. But he’s teaching at a university, so I mean there’s a lot of room for professional growth whether you have a history or not.

Joe commented on the changes he has seen since he graduated saying, “increasingly, I’m seeing associations with formally prosecuted professionals starting to form so you know, maybe the promotion or the creation of groups like that could be really helpful for people”. He also talked
about mentoring and support for returning citizen students, both from their peers and the MSW programs in general. He made the following recommendation about peer support:

the idea of mentoring or the idea of kind of I don’t know, pairing with someone who has been there before. I think we do that to a certain extent in social work, but I think it can be especially important when it comes to people who have these kinds of backgrounds on campus because a lot of times it will come with a lot of internalized stigmas.

Joe also stressed the importance of formal support from the MSW program with the following recommendation:

I guess if someone is an advisor or something like that they need to let people know like, “hey, your history was disclosed to me for the purpose of letting you know that we’ve got a group on campus you should meet or a person you can meet if you need any resources.” I guess the idea is just to let people know that they are individually supported and accepted. Like, “we’re going to be cool!”

Stan discussed the importance of transparency and honesty in the admissions process. He stressed transparency as a way to decrease the intimidation present during the admission process:

So the transparency... like the intimidation behind an application process. There’s the question. If I just knew if that question had to be there, why is the question there? This is the school of social work so we’re really about giving people second chances—just more information so that I’ll actually fill out the application and try

Stan also stated that he supported the inclusion of discussions about criminal background during the admission process. However, he stated that it needs to be a supportive and honest conversation with individuals about the real impact their criminal background can have on employment opportunities as a social worker:
I’m not necessarily an advocate for full removal of that conversation because I think that people need support and people need others to help them break down barriers and if nobody knows they can’t help you. Then there’s also the conversation like, “you have a severe degree of criminal sexual conduct on your record” so let’s talk about the real-life possibilities of you being very limited in the jobs you can get and so before you invest Bill recommended that universities actively communicate with prospective students who have a criminal background to let them know it is not as hard as they think it will be:

if anyone is applied to be a social worker I would encourage them to do so without having the fear of being stigmatized don’t let them get discouraged because from my experience it is actually a lot easier than I thought so you know maybe getting the word out it’s not as hard as you may perceive people are actually a lot more accepting of it

Implications and Recommendations

It seems a natural fit for the social work profession to actively promote and advocate for returning citizens to have access to higher education (ROSENTHAL ET AL., 2015). Advocating for equal access to education for returning citizens is not only the ethical thing to do, it stands to provide very tangible rewards for the profession. This study sheds light on the experiences of a small sample of MSW students with a known criminal background. It offers information that MSW educators should consider for program and policy development. When combined with the current literature they offer some important insights on areas where more research and information is needed.

Programs should ensure that the time from application to decision is statistically similar for applicants with a criminal background and applicants without a criminal background. The extensive delay in acceptance was a serious barrier for individuals with a criminal background.
It caused one individual to have to wait a year to attend graduate school and decreased the availability of financial aid for these applicants.

All policies and procedures related to prospective and current students with a criminal background should be evidence based. Restrictions or barriers should not be implemented unless they are supported by research as effective. This should permeate all arenas from admissions, matriculation, graduation, and professional licensing. In keeping with the strength-based philosophy of social work the researchers embedded all of the informant recommendations into the implications and recommendations section. The following guiding principles are suggested for policy development in MSW programs:

A) The policy in question is in keeping with social work values and ethics as outline in the NASW Code of Ethics. Ensuring that policies are in line with profession ethics and values allows MSW education programs to model appropriate professional practice to students and ensure consistent integration of social work values into educational programs. Vigorously enforcing professional values in policy development also forces educators to remain strength-based and supportive of their student body. Policies rooted in self-determination will support inclusion of historically disadvantaged individuals instead of restriction. This does not mean we do not develop policies that address students with a criminal background. Instead, it holds us accountable to our code of ethics by requiring transparent and empowering policies which are evidence based. This will change the paradigm within which we develop and implement policies. This paradigm shift will force MSW programs to move away from the policing that Crisp describes (2009) and toward developing policies that support and inform potential and current students, helping them to remove barriers to higher education instead of policies that become barriers to higher education.
B) There should be empirical evidence that supports the development of the policy in question. Any policy that restricts access to higher education should be carefully investigated before development and implementation. As Foucault and Bacchi suggest it is often the ideas that go unquestioned that have the most power (Bacchi, 1999). Social work is committed to the elimination of social and economic injustice. This requires us to question commonly held beliefs, including the belief that professional social workers who are returning citizens are more likely to harm to their clients than their non-offending peers, regardless of their offense.

University A’s policies regarding criminal background screening are an excellent example of evidence informed policies. University A’s admissions committee reviewed recidivism research related to specific offenses and reviewed research related to risk and risk assessment. The committee then decided what level of risk they were willing to accept for each specific offense and determined a screening level based on the level of risk. The screening levels were supported by empirical evidence related to specific offenses and level of risk. The committee determined three screening levels. The first level was denial based on high level of risk and high recidivism. The second level required applicants to complete a risk assessment instrument and participate in an interview with a committee comprised of the admissions direction, field office director, and MSW program coordinator. The third level was an ‘information only’ interview in which the admissions director talked with the applicant about how their criminal background would impact their social work career. University A put the criminal background screening policy on their web-site and e-mailed it to returning citizen applicants. Lastly, university A required all incoming MSW students to sign a criminal background waiver disclosure acknowledging that they understand university A’s criminal background policy.
The researcher suggests that MSW programs ask themselves the following questions related to criminal background screening:

1. What evidence supports the efficacy of requiring applicants to disclose their criminal background at the time of application?

2. What research supports requiring applicants to provide detailed accounts of their criminal record?

3. What evidence supports screening students for criminal background during the internship placement process?

4. What level of risk for each offense is the MSW program willing to take?

5. How can we be transparent in our policy development and implementation?

C) Transparency is important to our program and all policies are provided in full on the department web-site. Schools of social work should maintain rigorous transparency with all their policies, but they should be especially vigilant about policies involving returning citizens. The informants were clear that they want MSW programs to explain policies and their implications. Policies should be readily available and easily assessable for potential and current students. This allows schools to communicate clearly their expectations of potential and current students but also holds us accountable to our values, our profession, and our institutions. By maintaining transparent policies, we can better practice our professional ethical standards including: integrity of the profession, evaluation and research, commitment to social welfare, and engagement in social and political action (NASW, 2008).

MSW programs must critically analyze their policies and procedures addressing returning citizens. Details matter, and the details of policies inform the culture of programs. Many of the informants stated that they felt stigma from minor details. For example, Jim felt stigmatized
because his admission letter mentioned his criminal background. The recommendations outlined above help programs to develop appropriate policies, but there are numerous other ways universities can be more supportive and less punitive in their treatment of returning citizen students.

MSW programs could consider making all applicants read and sign a criminal background disclosure as part of their application process. The waiver would include information that outlines how a criminal background can impact an individual’s access to internships, employment, and licensing. If the information is ingrained as part of the admissions procedures for all applicants, then the policy is not stigmatizing but empowering. Programs should ask themselves “how can we be an ally in every student’s education?” Programs can develop procedures that promote student success. Programs can assign students to advisors that have an interest in working with returning citizen students or develop a student organization specifically for returning citizen students.

Programs can advocate for returning citizen students in the greater community. Programs can advocate for equal access to internship placements for returning citizen students. This change could have multiple positive outcomes. It would model for students how to advocate for fair and appropriate policies in social work agencies. One way programs could advocate would be to inform field placement agencies about the research surrounding access to employment for returning citizens.

MSW programs could advocate for changes to the public health code in their states. Public health codes mandate criminal background screening for health professionals during the licensure process. However, the researchers could not find evidence supporting the MPHCA policies restrictions based on criminal background. Social workers can conduct research that can
inform public policy. The can help start conversations between policy makers and returning citizens, which could lead to more transparency within their public health codes and licensure procedures.

How can MSW programs decrease the cumulative disadvantage that social work education programs are placing on returning citizens? Policies can be firmly rooted in strength-based philosophy of the social work profession. Informants expressed that they appreciated being informed of the many ways that a criminal background could impact their educational experience, their internship experience, and the likelihood of becoming licensed. Programs need to develop mechanisms to provide this information to potential students without increasing the time between application and acceptance to an MSW program.

This study offers areas for further research including research into graduate rates of students with criminal backgrounds. There is preliminary evidence that returning citizen students graduate at lower rates than their non-offending peers (Vliek, et al., 2016). This study was not able to recruit students who did not graduate or students who were admitted but did not enter programs thus it was not able to explore this phenomenon. Further research is suggested in this area.

Research about the unique gifts that returning citizen students will help to change the culture of MSW programs and higher educational institutions. This research should include returning citizens as researchers, as they are the experts in the field. They are also keenly aware of what they have to offer. As Sue stated:

we tell our clients—we talk so much about hope, we are in these collaborative relationships and we walk beside people and we tell people life can be different and you
have the power to change the environment and [we] live them out in our own lives and that is absolutely essential.
REFERENCES


LARA. (2010). *Occupational regulations sections of the Michigan public health code (articles 1, 7, 15, 19, and excerpts from articles 5 and 17, of act 368 of 1978, as amended)*. Bureau of Health Professions; Lansing, MI.


Appendix A

Email Invitation and Consent

Western Michigan University, Department of Interdisciplinary Health Sciences

Principal Investigator: Kieran Fogarty, PhD
Student Investigator: Amy Vliek, MSW, PhD candidate
Project Title: Examining the Impact of a Criminal Background on Social Work Education

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled "The Impact of a Criminal Background on MSW Students ". This is an exploratory study to gain insight into the lived experiences of MSW students with a known criminal background. The study is being conducted by Amy Vliek as part of her dissertation in the Department of Interdisciplinary Health Sciences at Western Michigan University. If you have any questions, you may contact Amy Vliek (269-387-3200), the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (269-387-8293) or the vice president for research (269-387-8298).

This survey is comprised of 15 multiple choice questions and will take approximately 10-20 minutes to complete. Your replies will be completely anonymous, so do not put your name anywhere on the survey. You may choose to not answer any question and simply leave it blank. You may choose to stop participating in the study at any time for any reason. If you choose to not participate in this survey, simply ignore this email. Following the link below and completing the survey indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply.

If you want to participate in stage II of this survey you can provide contact information in the final question, which is reported separately from the rest of the survey.

There are minimal known risks to you for participating in this study. Survey responses are anonymous; the email and IP addresses of participants will not be linked to individual survey responses. There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this survey, however results from this study will be disseminated at conferences and possibly submitted for publication in a professional journal. Thus, Master of Social Work (MSW) programs and future MSW students may benefit from your experiences.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (until the May 15, 2018). Because this is an anonymous survey, you do not need to sign a form to participate in this study. You may print a copy of this informed consent form for your records. If you decide that you would like to participate in this study, you may click on the link below, which will take you to the survey at QuestionPro:

[insert link here]
Appendix B

Stage I Survey

Informed Consent Document

Western Michigan University, Department of Interdisciplinary Health Sciences

Principal Investigator: Kieran Fogarty, PhD
Student Investigator: Amy Vliek, MSW, PhD candidate
Project Title: Examining the Impact of a Criminal Background on Social Work Education

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled "Exploring the Impact of a Criminal Background on Social Work Education". This is an exploratory study to gain insight into the lived experiences of MSW students with a known criminal background. The study is being conducted by Amy Vliek as part of her dissertation in the Department of Interdisciplinary Health Sciences at Western Michigan University.

If you have any questions, you may contact Amy Vliek (269-387-3200). You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board or the vice president for research (269-387-8298) if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

This survey is comprised of 15 multiple choice questions that ask about the MSW application process for applicants that have a criminal background. It will take approximately 10-20 minutes to complete. Your replies will be completely anonymous, so do not put your name anywhere on the survey. You may choose to not answer any question and simply leave it blank. You may choose to stop participating in the study by not submitting your survey. If you choose to not participate in this survey, simply ignore this email.

If you want to participate in stage II of this survey you can provide contact information in by following a link at the end of the survey. This information is reported separately from the rest of the survey.

There are minimal known risks to you for participating in this study. Survey responses are anonymous; the email and IP addresses of respondents will not be linked to individual survey responses. There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this survey, however results from this study will be disseminated at conferences and possibly submitted for publication in a professional journal. Thus, Master of Social Work (MSW) programs and future MSW students may benefit from your experiences.

This consent has been approved by the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) on May 11, 2017. Do not participate after May 11, 2018. Because this is an anonymous survey, you do not need to sign a form to participate in this
study. You may print a copy of this informed consent form for your records. If you decide that you would like to participate in this study, you may click NEXT and continue to the survey.

How many MSW program/s did you START an application for?
1. 1
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5
6. 6
7. 7
8. 8
9. 9
10. 10

How many MSW applications did you complete?
1. 0
2. 1
3. 2
4. 3
5. 4
6. 5
7. 6
8. 7
9. 8
10. 9
11. 10

When applying, did you research if you had to disclose your criminal background on the MSW application?
1. Yes
2. No

Did this impact your decision of where to apply?
1. Yes
2. No

How did this impact your choice of where to apply?
1. didn't apply to programs that asked
2. still applied to programs that asked
3. called programs to ask about requirement
4. asked the MSW program/university for a copy of the criminal background disclosure policy
5. Other (please specify)
Why did you not complete an MSW application?

Was a criminal background check conducted during the MSW application process? Please note: a criminal background check includes anything the MSW program/university required in order to substantiate your disclosed criminal background.
1. Yes
2. No

Who paid for the criminal background check?
1. applicant (me)
2. department/university
3. no charge

Was an interview (phone or in person) required as part of your application process?
1. Yes
2. No

Who conducted the interview?

Please indicate if any of the following questions were asked at your interview?
Please note: you do not answer the questions, just indicate if you were asked the questions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Asked</th>
<th>Not Asked</th>
<th>Not Relevant</th>
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<td>What are your offenses?</td>
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<td>How old were you at the time of your first offense?</td>
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<td>How old were you at the time of your last offense?</td>
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<td>How long ago was your last offense?</td>
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<td>What was your sentence?</td>
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<td>Did you successfully complete your sentence?</td>
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<td>Are you currently on probation or parole?</td>
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<td>Do any of your friends/family have a criminal background?</td>
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<td>How have you changed your life since your last offense?</td>
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<td>Were others physically harmed during your criminal acts?</td>
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<td>Were your offenses drug or alcohol related?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you clean and/or sober?</td>
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<td>If so, how long have you been clean or sober?</td>
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</table>

Were you admitted into an MSW program/s?
1. Yes
2. No
Did you attend an MSW program?
1. Yes
2. No

Which MSW program did you attend/are you attending?
1. Andrews University
2. Eastern Michigan University
3. Ferris State University
4. Grand Valley State University
5. Madonna University
6. Michigan State University
7. Spring Arbor University
8. University of Michigan
9. Wayne State University
10. Western Michigan University

Were you provided with a copy of the criminal background disclosure policy for the MSW program you applied to?
1. Yes
2. No

If so, please explain (in your own words) the criminal background policy of the MSW program you applied to.

In your opinion, did your criminal background impact your admission decision?
1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know

In your opinion, how did your criminal background impact your admission decision?

Were there other application requirements specific to your criminal background that this survey did not ask you about?
1. Yes
2. No
3. If yes: what were the requirements?

The researcher (Amy) is conducting interviews of MSW students who have a criminal background. She is very interested in learning about the experiences students had (or are having) in their MSW programs. If you are interested in participating in an interview, please provide a first name (real or fake) and a phone number and/or e-mail where Amy can reach you. If you provide information you are not required to participate in an interview - you are just agreeing to get more information about it. Thank you for your consideration.
First Name

Phone

Email Address
Appendix C

Follow-Up Phone Contact

Follow-up phone contact for Stage II participants

Thank you for volunteering to participate in the interview portion of this research. My name is Amy Vliek, and I am interested in learning about your experiences as an MSW student with a criminal history known by your MSW program. I imagine this will take between one and two hours. Are you interested in learning more or do you have any questions?

I would like to meet you at a place of your choosing to conduct the interview. It should be someplace private to protect your confidentiality. I will record the interview so that I can transcribe it later. You can choose to use your real name or an alias. Do you have any questions? Would you like to schedule an interview?
Appendix D

Stage II Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Amy Vliek. Thank you for agreeing to learn more about this study. As we discussed earlier, I am interested in learning about your graduate education experience as a student with a known criminal history. First, I would like to review the informed consent procedures for this research study. If at any time, you have questions about the informed consent document and what it means please stop me and ask (review informed consent).

I will be asking you many questions related to your criminal history and your experience in your MSW program. Please know that I am very aware of the personal nature of this information. I greatly appreciate your willingness to share information with me, and I also respect your right to not answer any of the questions I ask. If anything is too personal, please feel free to let me know you are not comfortable answering the questions. I will be audio-recording the interview with this devise (show devise). The interview should take between fifteen minutes to one hour, depending on our conversation. Participants often do not want their actual names or actual names of other people used during the interview process. You may choose to use actual names, or you may use any make-believe name that you like. How would you like me to refer to you? Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions:

1. Basic demographic questions (age, ethnicity, gender)
2. How did the MSW program you attended come to know about your criminal history?
3. If there was an interview related to your criminal history what was it like? Who conducted it?
4. How many people in the MSW program knew about your criminal history?
5. Tell me about how you were treated in the MSW program?

6. Did you experience any discrimination from the MSW program due to your criminal history? If so, how did it impact you?

7. How do you feel your criminal history impacted your experience in field placements?

8. Tell me how you felt about the stigma related to your criminal history?
Appendix E

HSIRB Approval Letter

Date: May 16, 2017

To: Kieran Fogarty, Principal Investigator
Amy Vliek, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 17-03-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Examining the Impact of a Criminal Background on Social Work Education” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may only be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study”). Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: May 15, 2018

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