ADVOCATING FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE UNITED STATES CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM: EXPLORING RELATIONAL ACTIVISM MEDIATED BY INTERSECTIONAL AWARENESS AND IDENTITY

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Abstract

People who have mental illness are over-incarcerated in the United States. This narrative inquiry study was conducted using a critical research paradigm to explore the efficacy of using relational activism mediated by intersectional awareness and identity to advocate for reforming how the criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness. A screening survey identified a purposive sample of participants using the following criteria: demographic diversity, awareness of patterns of over-representation in incarceration, awareness of patterns of incarceration among people with mental illness, attitude of support for prison reform for people with mental illness, history of at least one instance of criminal justice reform activism. Semi-structured in-depth interviews of participants provided the main source of data. Intersectional analysis was applied to the data. Findings showed that participants possessed intersectional awareness of others and a keen sense of their own identity, which allowed them to successfully employ relational activism strategies in their advocacy efforts. They were also compelled by inner ethics to engage in social justice activism. They supported spreading mental health awareness and transitioning to therapeutic responses for mentally-ill people who engage in some behaviors labeled as criminal, rather than punitive responses. Several participants had a prison abolition mindset regarding people with mental illness. Important related findings emerged concerning the over-incarceration of Black men and intersectional differences in participant eligibility and willingness to participate in the study. An implication suggested by the findings is that activists who want to catalyze transformational change must be intentional in building relationships with dissimilar others. Other implications that arose from related findings are: Activists should be intentional about working toward changing the language of criminal justice from medico-legal and legal-normative to one that recognizes mental illness as a human condition worthy of
empathic support. Activists should also engage in highly-intentional efforts to reach on a deep human level of understanding the most intersectionally-unaware and disconnected people who hold power to make decisions about people with mental illness.

_Keywords_: mental illness, mental disability, incarceration, relational activism, intersectionality, identity, advocacy, narrative inquiry, prison reform, prison abolition
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Lorraine Hudson, who longed for a college education to pursue her dream of becoming a nurse.

Mom, life circumstances interfered with your dream of higher education and a nursing career, but you have been an inspiration to me in pursuing this degree. It is not by chance that the focus of this dissertation is social justice, because you have been a role model of fairness, empathy, and unconditional love all of your life. Thank you. I hope this dissertation is a worthy, although small, tribute to all you have given and done for me.

With love and gratitude,

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Had it not been for the guidance of Dr. Carolyn Bair, my dissertation chair, I might still be working on this research study for an indefinite period of time. She was enormously helpful in roping me in when I was too wordy or started veering off on tangents I found interesting. She was patient and kind but direct with me. She challenged me to do better even when I wasn’t sure I could rise to the bar she set. I am grateful for her guidance and support in this dissertation process. I am also grateful to Dr. Bryan Patterson of my dissertation committee who patiently stuck with me, even though my topic was not typical or easy to understand at first. The goal of critical research is to foster change. If others don’t understand what the writer is saying, it’s hard to influence them to change. Dr. Bair and Dr. Patterson took the time to try to understand what my research topic and goals were and to help me find ways to better express them so others would be able to understand them when presented in this dissertation. I want to thank Dr. Everington for agreeing to be the outside reader for this project. I am fortunate to have someone on my committee with her knowledge and passion about creating a more just system for people with disabilities. I’m also grateful for Dr. Trammell, who supported me at the very beginning of this dissertation endeavor. I thank him for continuing to keep in touch, sending me bits of information he comes across that are related to my research interests. Finally, I thank the people who gave me the gift of participating in this research study. This study could not have happened without you. You were generous in telling your stories, and that is a gift of immeasurable value.

There are so many others I need to thank for their part in this journey. Some of the most influential people in a person’s life often never know the impact they have on the other person. I probably wouldn’t be completing this doctoral work if it wasn’t for a chance meeting with my cousin, Arthur, at a downtown Pittsburgh bus stop one morning. He was on his way to a class at
the University of Pittsburgh and asked if I wanted to join him and see what it was like, so I did. I was fascinated. Up until then, I had never thought of attending college, but after that day I thought about it a lot. A year and half later, I was enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh. I doubt that my cousin knows the impact on my life of his invitation to accompany him to a class decades ago. I’m glad we ran into each other that morning.

Years later, another opportunity came my way when I was teaching Adult Basic Education at the Allegheny County Jail. A young Black man named Andre, not more than nineteen or twenty years old, broke my heart. He was the most intelligent student in my class, but would silently shuffle into the classroom with his head hanging and shoulders drooping like he felt “less than.” He was quiet, and he told me he didn’t think he was very smart, while White men in my class with half his intelligence swaggered like kings. I didn’t have the vocabulary at the time to know that the thing I was witnessing that broke my heart was called White privilege, but I knew that it saddened and angered me. I didn’t just see the effects of it in Andre, but in all of my jail students, with most of the Black men under-estimating their worth and abilities while most of the White men over-estimated theirs. I’ve never had any tolerance for bigotry, racism, or unfairness of any kind, but something about how Andre hung his head ripped my heart out. I’m sure Andre doesn’t remember me, but his image is burned in my memory. He planted a seed that renewed my resolve to play my part in decimating social injustice wherever I find it. I hope this thesis helps to do that.

Finally, a young woman in my family, I’ll call her Carla, has struggled with mental illness since she was about fourteen years old. She has experienced a great deal of legal discrimination and abuse resulting from her mental health diagnoses. The daily activities most people take for granted are enormous challenges for her. Also, a young man in my family,
whom I’ll call Dominic, took his own life because of undiagnosed mental illness, and also spent
time incarcerated. Carla and Dominic are the inspiration for this research. The criminal justice
system must stop criminalizing mental illness and causing more hardship for those trying to
navigate the many challenges of living with their diagnoses. The Carlas and Dominics of the
world need social support, not ostracism.

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tiny woman with a big heart, strong work ethic, and mischievous laugh, I’ll always remember
watching you make homemade pasta in the kitchen on Herschel Street. Grandpap, artist,
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the efficacy of using relational activism mediated by intersecting identities to advocate for prison reform for people with mental illness. Prison reform for people with mental illness will be generally defined as those reforms that favor mental health treatment over incarceration. This reform position is also known as prison abolition. To clarify, prison abolition and prison reform may be thought of as the two ends of the prison reform continuum: The most reformist reforms work well within the prison paradigm, while the most abolitionist reforms reject all penal responses for people with mental illness. Knowledge generated by this study is expected to inform prison scholars and activists who advocate for people with mental illness. It may also inform policy makers and law makers as well as people working in the prison and mental health professions. The primary goal of this research is to encourage solution-focused dialogue about the incarceration of people with mental illness and provide new insights that can inform actions that attempt to significantly reduce or eliminate the incarceration of people who have mental illness.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the problem of over-representation of people who have mental illness in penal institutions. The research questions are then presented, followed by the rationale for the study and a definition of relational activism to establish an understanding of the concept as used in this study. Finally, the chapter introduces the discussion of the theoretical framework presented in chapter two.

Statement of the Problem

In the United States, there are several populations of people who are over-represented in jails and prisons, a product of mass incarceration, which refers to the unprecedented increase in incarceration in the United States from the 1970s through the 2010s (The Sentencing Project,
African American and Latino people are over-represented in the penal system (Rampey et al., 2016; Wacquant, 2010), as are people who are struggling with poverty (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015; Western & Pettit, 2010), substance abuse (Wagner & Rabuy, 2015), and the effects of inadequate education (Harlow, 2003). People with mental illness are also greatly over-represented (Bagaric, 2016; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Kuehn, 2014), often with no charges pending against them (Pustilnik, 2005).

Although the steep rises in incarceration that characterized the period of mass incarceration are no longer present, neither is a corresponding trend in mass decarceration (The Sentencing Project, 2017b). Levels of incarceration have remained at peak highs over the past decade, with only slight decreases that are anemic by comparison to the steep rises of the mass incarceration era (The Sentencing Project, 2017b). The continued over-representation of people with mental illness in United States penal institutions and how activists attempt to reverse that trend was the focus of this research.

**Research Problem and Significance**

The population that was the focus of this research study is people with mental illness. Information and history about other over-represented incarcerated groups is included in the literature review, as it is germane to the intersectional nature of the study. Historical oppression and privilege are also relevant to the intersectional nature of the study because they provide insights into the origins of the identities of participants and their audiences. Therefore, the literature review provides background information on historical oppressions of various over-represented incarcerated groups to explore whether or not there is overlap between some oppressed identities and empathic support for the oppressed identity of mentally-ill.
Mental Illness and Over-Representation in U.S. Jails and Prisons

People struggling with mental illness are greatly over-represented in United States jails and prisons (Bagaric, 2016; Gilligan, 2001; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Kuehn, 2014). This phenomenon is a result of mass deinstitutionalization from state mental hospitals that began in the 1960s without a corresponding increase in community services to meet their needs (Gilligan, 2001; Soderstrom, 2007). People with mental illness who display behaviors that are typical symptoms of their mental health diagnoses and that society deems ‘deviant’ are more likely to come into police contact and be arrested, convicted, and sentenced than people without mental illness (Soderstrom, 2007; Sultan, 2006; Yohana, 2013). Thus, when this population was mass released from the institution of mental hospitals, it eventually was found in the prison system in nearly equal numbers (Gilligan, 2001; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Yohanna, 2013).

Unfortunately, penal institutions are not adequate mental health providers. Their harsh conditions often make existing mental illness worse, or foster mental illness in people who did not previously have a mental health diagnosis (Glidden & Rovner, 2012; Kondo, 2011; Sultan, 2006). People with mental illness are over-represented in the penal system not because they are inherently more criminogenic than most people, but because there are not enough services to appropriately and humanely meet their needs (Sultan, 2006).

Summary of the Research Problem

Over-incarceration of people who have mental illness is a problem that resulted from policy changes in the United States that began in the 1960s. To overcome this, it is deemed necessary to form collaborative alliances between those who are negatively affected by the criminal justice system, such as people with mental illness, and others who support their rights of full citizenship. Using relational activism (O’Shaugnessy & Kennedy, 2010) with intersectional
awareness to cross social divides (Collins & Bilge, 2016) between those who have experienced negative criminal justice contact and those who have not could create understanding, as well as facilitate collaborations that could in turn catalyze change for over-represented incarcerated groups, such as people with mental illness.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between intersectional awareness and identity of persons with mental illness and prison reform activists’ abilities to influence others through relational activism. The researcher used a narrative inquiry approach within a critical research paradigm and applied intersectional analysis to the data.

The research questions that were investigated are:

1. How do connections built between activists and their audiences influence their audiences’ receptiveness to prison reform for people with mental illness?
2. How do identities prison reform activists share with their audiences mediate their ability to build connections with their audiences?
3. Where do prison reform activists fall on the prison reform continuum regarding people with mental illness?

**Rationale for the Study**

Social rules and structures that are deeply-embedded through a long history can be difficult to change. Supporting ideas that are radically different from taken-for-granted social discourses, such as treatment instead of incarceration for people with mental illness, can feel risky and even irrational to people who have accepted without question the legitimacy of the status quo as self-evident. Further, prison reformists have been working for many decades with negligible success (Byrd, 2016; Gottschalk, 2016). Some scholars and activists believe that is
because, for transformational change to occur, activists must reach their audiences on emotional, ethical, moral, and cultural levels to make deeper connections with them to motivate social justice change for people with mental illness (Doob & Webster, 2014; Lenn 2011). Many people may be more willing to at least listen to and consider ideas that are counter to deeply-embedded social practices if presented within the psychological safety of a trusted or respected relationship and if activists can connect to their audiences on those deeper emotional, ethical, moral, and cultural dimensions.

To explore those possibilities, this research used intersectionality theory to examine whether relational activism plays a role in successful prison reform activism for people with mental illness. As used in this study, relational activism is an umbrella term that describes how some activism has been studied and carried out by various scholars and activists for several decades (Cherry, 2006; Diani, 1992; O’Shaugnessy & Kennedy, 2010). O’Shaugnessy and Kennedy (2010) coined the term relational activism in their study examining the work of women in environmental activism. What they described as relational activism can be summarized as the following four attributes, which served as its definition for this study:

1. It is embedded in daily practice and leads by example.
2. It intentionally seeks to build or enhance relationships with people who do not share one’s views to use those relationships to influence change.
3. It is committed to long-term relational engagement to bring about lasting change.
4. It bridges the private and public spheres of activism because more overt conventional activism relies on its behind-the-scenes relationship-building activities.
Key Terms

Some terms used in this study are defined below to establish a common understanding. While there may be some variations in how these terms are defined, for purposes of this study, the following definitions will be used:

Audience. This refers to the person or persons with whom an activist is communicating in order to influence them to support a social justice cause. In this study using relational activism, the audience is often one person or a very small group.

Collateral consequences/collateral costs. Collateral consequences are legally-imposed post-release civil penalties in addition to the stigma and tremendous human and social consequences of incarcerated time. They are not part of the direct punishment for a crime. Examples are housing restrictions and ineligibility for student financial aid or welfare benefits. Effects of collateral costs often include personal loss, as well, such as dissolution of family relationships or poor school performance among children with incarcerated parents.

Full citizenship. This refers to the usual freedoms that United States citizens without criminal records have, such as the right to live where they choose, access to financial aid for higher education, the right to pursue any type of employment they choose, the right to vote, and numerous other freedoms people without prison records have access to in their daily lives.

Interlocking oppressions. While intersectionality can be used to understand both marginalizing and privileging identities of a person, interlocking oppressions refers exclusively to those identities of an individual that oppress and marginalize based on dominant social rules (Collins, 1990). In the United States, one person’s interlocking oppressions may include, for example, being female, Black, Muslim, disabled, and poor.
**Intersectionality.** Each person’s total identity is multi-faceted and includes multiple identities, such as gender, race, ability, class, education, sexual orientation, and a host of other identities that make up the whole person. *Intersectionality* examines and describes how a person’s multiple identities intersect with power to compound that person’s marginalization or privilege based on social discourses established by the dominant social groups (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1996; Hancock, 2015; Liasidou, 2016; McCall, 2005).

**Mental illness.** Mental illness is used to refer to mental health, or psychiatric, disorders identified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There are many different terms used to refer to mental illness, such as psychiatric disorder, mental disorder, mental health disorder, and other terms. The researcher acknowledges that some people may find some terms more appropriate and less negative than others. However, achieving consensus on the most correct and respectful terminology is difficult. Therefore, the decision was made to use *mental illness* because it reflects the target population’s main struggle.

**Prison abolition.** *Prison abolition* is a way of alleviating social problems so that the need for prisons is drastically reduced, benefiting society, not just would-be inmates (Jackson & Meiners, 2010; Meiners, 2011). It addresses the conditions that increase a person’s likelihood of being incarcerated, such as mental illness, poor education, substance abuse, extreme poverty, parental incarceration, food deserts, unemployment, insufficient access to health care, and other contributing social conditions. It is proactive, rehabilitative, inclusive, and humane; and it rejects the prison paradigm as reactive, punitive, exclusionary, and inhumane.

**Prison reform.** Compared with prison abolition, *prison reform* works exclusively within the prison paradigm and language to improve it rather than to dismantle it through social
restructuring (Jackson & Meiners, 2010). The differences between prison abolition and prison reform include the starting point of change, the degree of change advocated, and the perception of the legitimacy of the prison paradigm.

**Prison reform continuum.** Prison reforms that work exclusively within the prison paradigm and language are at one end of the prison reform continuum. Prison reforms that support non-penal solutions and structural changes to address crime and other societal problems and challenges are at the opposite end of the prison reform continuum. There can be many degrees of reform in between the two extremes of the continuum.

**Root causes change/reform.** See structural change/social restructuring below.

**Structural change/social restructuring.** Structural change is the goal of prison abolition. It refers to changes in social practices that remove the conditions that are often associated with a person’s future incarceration, such as poverty or not having access to mental health treatment. This is also referred to as *root causes change* or *root causes reform*. Social restructuring is designed to remove challenges that are associated with high incarceration rates and replace them with social supports to avoid incarceration and live in the community with all the rights and privileges of full citizenship.

**Summary**

Several marginalized groups are over-represented in United States jails and prisons. This study examined prison reform activism for people with mental illness who are over-represented in United States jails and prisons through an intersectional lens, with a special interest in the potential of relational activism as an activist strategy. Intersectionality as the theoretical framework for the study is discussed in detail in the next chapter, including the rationale for pairing it with the exploration of relational activism for a social justice purpose.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examined how the interplay of various identities mediate the outcomes of prison reform work, so it is fitting that intersectionality was the theoretical lens through which the research questions were explored. Because this study also explored relational activism, it also examined bridgework, or building relationships across differences (Malhorta & Pérez, 2005) for its potential usefulness in prison activism.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, but its basic premises began to emerge in the vibrant activism of the 1960s and 1970s (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2015), and even more than a century earlier in ideas of people such as Sojourner Truth (Crenshaw, 1989; Truth, 1851), Maria Stewart (1832), and W. E. B. DuBois (1994). However, Crenshaw’s coining of the term in her work on the intersectional oppressions of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989) provided a name for the theories, rhetoric, and ideas that had been practiced in the scholarship and activism of others before her. Language is powerful; and giving a name to the theories and ideas scholars and activists had been using for over a century gave them the power of legitimacy, as well as a foundation on which future scholar-activists could build (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Liasidou, 2016).

Roots and Development of Intersectionality

Intersectionality has roots in critical race theory (Crenshaw, 2002; Curtin, Stewart, & Cole, 2015), critical legal studies (Manuel, 2006), and Black feminism (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2015; Manuel, 2006). It developed out of a need to address the concerns of Black women, whose needs were not adequately addressed by either critical race theory or feminist theory. Black women were doubly-oppressed as Black and female, a situation referred to as
interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 1990). Critical race theory tended to benefit Black men, and feminism tended to benefit affluent or educated White women. This situation was clearly illustrated in the case of Emma DeGraffenreid, an African American woman who applied unsuccessfully for a better position at her place of employment (DeGraffenreid v General Motors, 1977). Her claims of racial and gender discrimination were dismissed by the court because DeGraffenreid’s employer hired African Americans and women, two groups protected under the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The court refused to address DeGraffenreid’s claim that the African Americans hired by the company were all men who worked in labor positions, and the women hired for the more desirable type of position for which she applied were all White. She wanted protection as an African-American woman, not as an African American or woman, as the court viewed her standing in the case. DeGraffenreid claimed discrimination against the intersection of her identities of African American and woman, not each separately, but the court was unwilling to acknowledge her claim. DeGraffenreid is just one example of how intersectionality grew out of a need to address the interlocking oppressions of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1996). Some other examples of court cases that advanced intersectional recognition and representation in the courts included Jeffries v Harris County Community Action Association (1977), Phillips v Martin Marietta Corp. (1971), and Lam v University of Hawaii (1994).

Black feminism developed to remedy that need (Crenshaw, 1989; Curtin, Stewart, & Cole, 2015; Hancock, 2015; Liasidou, 2016). Black feminism acknowledged and challenged the cumulative oppressions of Black women. Still, at least in the beginning, it focused primarily on intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999; Liasidou, 2016). As it developed, scholar-activists looked at other cumulative disadvantages of
Black women, such as poverty and living in communities of high surveillance (Crenshaw, 1996; Windsor, Dunlap, & Armour, 2012). As Black feminism continued to develop, scholar-activists recognized that the concept of intersecting oppressions could be applied to other identities, such as people with mental illness, people with intellectual disabilities, homeless people, poorly-educated people, people with physical or learning disabilities, people with criminal records, and others (Liasidou, 2016; Manuel, 2006; Western & Pettit, 2010). Intersectionality expanded the Black feminism ideas of intersecting oppressions to include other overlapping identities that are frequently affected by social injustice at the intersections of power and identity (Collins, 2015; Liasidou, 2016; Manuel, 2006). Today intersectionality is used to study and advocate for a wide variety of people experiencing cumulative disadvantages or oppressions (Arditti, Burton, & Neeves-Botelo, 2010; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Windsor, Dunlap, & Armour, 2012).

There are some definitional differences in how scholars interpret intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hancock, 2015), but the essence of intersectionality involves a multiplicity of structural ills inflicted on a person based on his or her combined identities. The dominant groups in society define the value of various identities, and privilege or oppress them according to their measure of each identity’s worth. The idea is the same, whether it is called interlocking oppressions (Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999), cumulative disadvantage (Arditti, Burton, & Neeves-Botelo, 2010), matrix of domination (Collins, 1990), intersecting identities (Manuel, 2006), or similar terminology. The important idea is that social rules and structures established by dominant identities oppress other identities, and the oppressions multiply with the number of oppressed identities a person has and the degree to which each identity is devalued by the dominant societal identities.
This study adopts the core ideas of intersectionality as articulated by Collins and Bilge (2016). Core ideas of intersectionality as described by Collins and Bilge include its complex analysis of social injustice and power relations within a social location or context, and striving to develop relationships across social divides to achieve social justice goals. The use of intersectionality as an analytic tool involves examining power relationships at the intersections of identity and power that coincide with oppression and marginalization within a social context. According to Collins and Bilge (2016):

…intersectional analysis examines how power relations are intertwined and mutually constructing. Race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, ethnicity, nation, religion, and age are categories of analysis, terms that reference important social divisions. But they are also categories that gain meaning from power relations of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation. (p. 7)

This study was particularly directed toward intersectionality’s core idea of building relationships across social differences and divisions. Feminist researchers referred to this as bridging or bridgework (Faver, 2001; Malhorta & Pérez, 2005). Other scholars who used intersectionality used this terminology as well (Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999). Bridging is a relationship in which the purpose is to connect one thing to another. Malhorta and Pérez (2005, p. 59) described it as “facilitate[ing] crossings between two dissimilar realities,” which is analogous to Collins and Bilge’s (2016) core idea of building relationships and coalitions across social differences. Malhorta and Pérez (2005) articulated three types of bridgework as “bridging to community, bridging to power, and bridging to consciousness” (p. 47). Because identities and power relationships are fluid, not static, the role a person plays in bridging varies according to context, purpose, and the audience with which one wants to
communicate. Although the purpose of bridging is to strategically use one’s power to help others cross to community, power, or consciousness to achieve a social justice or political goal, Malharta and Pérez (2005) emphasized that bridges are meant to empower and, as such, should be *temporary* means of crossing, rather than maintained as sites of power differentials. Severs, Celis, and Erzeel (2016) also recognized fluidity of power as used in intersectionality and described it as a give and take between messenger and audience, with the balance of power constantly renegotiated.

The identities a researcher uses to classify participants is important to intersectional analysis. For this reason, Manuel (2006) noted that Crenshaw cautioned against over- or under-inclusion of identities. Over-inclusion is the “extent to which the experiences of marginalized groups are claimed by a larger mainstream group” (Manual, 2006, p. 181). Under-inclusion refers to a minority within a group not having their needs addressed by the larger group, such as the case when Black women’s needs were not met through inclusion in the feminist movement, necessitating their splinter to Black feminism. This is also referred to as horizontal, or within group, differences (Manuel, 2006). Vertical intersectionality refers to between group differences, such as between different classes or genders (Manuel, 2006). In research using intersectionality, paying attention to relevant vertical and horizontal intersections is important in order to avoid over- or under-inclusion in intersectional analysis.

**Application of Intersectionality**

Intersectionality was well suited for this research study because it aligned with the study’s purpose in social justice activism. The study was concerned with the social inequalities and power relations that maintain the demographically-skewed United States prison system and sought to understand how some activists engage others and create momentum toward social
justice goals. To achieve that, the context of the lives of the people who are most often incarcerated must be considered, as well as the historical and current social and political contexts that gave rise to the current system and perpetuate it. The study examined the potential of a relational activism approach for achieving the social justice goal of prison reform for people with mental illness. Part of the relational strategy is to build relationships with people who do not share one’s views to influence them toward the desired change. This is compatible with intersectionality’s core idea of relationality, which attempts to build relationships across social differences to create social justice change. Analysis of how these different factors interact provided insights about how people engage in criminal justice activism for people with mental illness. Those insights provided a foundation for generating possible ideas for how to create a more socially-just and humane way of addressing the human struggles that often foreshadow incarceration. Figures 1 and 2 provide visual representations of how this study applied intersectionality.
Figure 1: Study model of shared intersecting identities mediating activists’ ability to build connections with audience and audience receptiveness to prison reform messages within a relational activism approach (R1 and R2)
Figure 2. Study model of where prison activists fall on the prison reform continuum for people with mental illness (R3)
CHAPTER 3: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter presents a review of literature relevant to this research study. Four streams of literature were investigated to contextualize and lay the foundation for the study. Included in each literature stream described below was a special focus on mental illness. First, the development and current state of incarceration in the United States was briefly examined. Second, the collateral and human costs of incarceration for individuals, families, and society was discussed. The third section focused on prison reform. The fourth section described relational activism and the rationale for exploring its efficacy in prison reform work. Finally, these ideas were synthesized into a cohesive summary of the topic.

Incarceration in the United States

The United States has a long and tarnished history of oppression by confinement segregation based on difference (Davis, 1998; Escobar, 2015; Gottschalk, 2010; Hernández, Muhammad, & Thompson, 2015; Hester, 2015; Western & Pettit, 2010). Native American reservations, the mission system, slavery, and internment camps of World War II were the major difference-based, large scale confinement oppressions in the United States (Davis, 1998). Those were followed by mass incarceration, the fifth and most recent difference-based confinement oppression (Alexander, 2010; Cooper, 2013; Gottschalk, 2010; Hernández, Muhammad, & Thompson, 2015; Hester, 2015; McLeod, 2017; Wacquant, 2010). Confinement oppression refers to any practice where the dominant social group segregates, confines, and limits the rights of an oppressed group based on how the oppressed group differs from the dominant one. Mass incarceration is a confinement oppression. Some of the identities of difference that are over-represented in the United States penal system include African American and Latino people (Rampey et al., 2016; Wacquant, 2010), people with mental illness (Kinsler & Saxman, 2007;
Pustilnik, 2005), people struggling with substance abuse (The Sentencing Project, 2015; Wagner & Rabuy, 2015), people who have low levels of educational attainment (Harlow, 2003; Rampey et al., 2016), and people from impoverished communities (Rabuy & Kopf, 2015; Western & Pettit, 2010).

Although this study focused on prison reform concerning people with mental illness, this introduction to the section briefly mentions the four previous confinement oppressions to help contextualize the problem by providing a sense of how the long history of difference-based confinement oppression in the United States has created a deeply-embedded prison paradigm that is extremely resistant to change (Arrigo, 2001; Martensen, 2012; McLeod, 2017; Olzak & Shanahan, 2014). Its long history has the effect of characterizing it with legitimacy that few people in the United States interrogate.

**Competitive Group Threat**

Competitive group threat is a major impetus for difference-based oppression (Gottschalk, 2010; Hernández, Muhammad, & Thompson, 2015; Hester, 2015; Olzak & Shanahan, 2014). As legal boundaries enforcing inequality in a society are removed, the dominant group feels threatened by competition for well-paying jobs, decent housing, a good education, and various other prized amenities of life (Olzak & Shanahan, 2014). To preserve their dominance, the dominant group begins devising and implementing new ‘legal’ means of keeping rising groups down. Thus, the Jim Crow laws followed the abolition of slavery, and an array of ‘separate but equal’ legislation was implemented to preserve racial inequality (Alexander, 2010; Cooper, 2013; Davis, 1998; Kohler-Hausmann, 2015; Wacquant, 2010). The following section discusses the history and relationship between mass incarceration and the competitive group threat of a few marginalized groups as demonstrated through civil rights movements.
History of Oppressed Identities

The struggle for equality, particularly between Blacks and Whites, has been a long-burning issue in the United States. The roots of other over-incarcerated groups in the United States (Gottschalk, 2010; Gross, 2015; Harlow, 2003; Hester, 2015; Western & Pettit, 2010) trace back to the country’s historical degradation of Black people (McLeod, 2017). According to McLeod (2017), the United States’ historical subordination of Black people creates a racist undercurrent present in all identities of penal over-representation:

Criminal processes in the United States assumed their especially degrading and dehumanizing character through historical practices of racial subordination that have led blackness and criminality to be connected in the American imagination. These racial dynamics generally inform the American tolerance for penal severity, thoroughly infecting U.S. penal practices and modes of thought about crime and punishment. Racialized ideas about crime and imprisonment influence criminal law’s harshness and violence, in other words, even when criminal suspects and defendants are not African-American. (McLeod, 2017, p. 663)

Thus, although this study is concerned with over-incarceration of people with mental illness, it is important to be aware of the experiences of Black people in the development of the United States criminal justice system, because the oppressions of all other over-represented incarcerated identities flow from the model of racist degradation described above by McLeod (2017).

The 1960s saw the emergence of three different but overlapping civil rights movements in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement with its focus on racial equality was in full swing (Cooper, 2013; Hinton, 2015a); the Prisoner’s Rights Movement was getting underway (Chase, 2015; Kohler-Hausmann, 2015); and the second wave of the Chicano Movement was
gaining momentum (Escobar, 2015; Hester, 2015). As these civil rights movements amped up, politicians and special interest groups with their own agendas pushed back (Alexander, 2010; Cooper, 2013; Eisenberg, 2016; Gottschalk, 2010). Clashes in ideals and values often had volatile and violent results (Chase, 2015; Hinton, 2015a). Added to that tumultuous period of United States history were President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs, including the War on Poverty and the War on Crime (Hinton, 2015a; Wacquant, 2010). In the midst of the three civil rights movements, the inhumane treatment of institutionalized people with mental illness was exposed, prompting public demand for more humane treatment of people with mental illness, coinciding with the spirit of civil rights sweeping the country.

**Chicano Movement and the Carceral State.** Hester (2015) identified immigration control as a cornerstone of the United States prison system. Beginning in the 1930s, there was a gradual tightening of deportation laws affecting Mexican immigrants, culminating in the launch of Operation Wetback in 1954, a campaign targeting Mexican immigrants and resulting in Mexicans accounting for 96% of all deportations that year (Hester, 2015). The use of ‘wetback’ in the official naming of that law enforcement policy illustrates the strong anti-Mexican bias that was rampant in the southwestern United States in the twentieth century (Hernández, 2006).

The first wave of the Chicano Movement occurred in the 1940s when Mexican-American activism increased to protest housing discrimination, sub-standard education for Mexican-American children, and relegation of Mexican-Americans to menial low-wage work which affected their overall quality of life (Escobar, 2015). That caused tension between law enforcement and the Chicano community, resulting in increased arrests of Mexican-Americans (Escobar, 2015). By 1967, fed up with the way discrimination and their second-class citizenship status limited their potential, Mexican-Americans began to organize and ignite the second wave
of the Chicano Movement (Escobar, 2015). Lack of equal educational opportunities was one of the main oppressions the movement fought to eliminate (Escobar, 2015). In response, law enforcement became increasingly repressive, expanding its surveillance of Mexican-American communities. Violence between Chicanos and police increased as each side responded to the actions of the other with greater and greater force, and arrests of Mexican-Americans increased (Escobar, 2015; Gottschalk, 2010). According to Gottschalk (2010), “immigration detention has become a growth industry” (p. 71), with an eleven-fold increase since the 1970s.

**Prisoners’ Rights Movement and Civil Rights.** While the Chicano Movement was at its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, the landmark court decision *Cooper v. Pate* (1967) gave the Prisoners’ Rights Movement the foothold it needed to gain momentum. The central debate of the Prisoners’ Rights Movement was whether prisoners deserved civil rights (Chase, 2015; Kohler-Hausmann, 2015). The *Cooper* case settled that debate by ruling for the first time in United States history that prisoners have the right to sue in federal court under the Enforcement Act of 1871, which was enacted to prevent racial violence. Prior to the *Cooper* ruling, the notion that prisoners had no rights was reinforced by the Thirteenth Amendment with its slavery loophole, which stated, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (U. S. Constitution). The *Cooper* ruling opened the door for prisoners to fight for their rights in court. With their new legal status, prisoners reaped the benefits of increased civil rights court victories from the 1960s to the 1990s.

The prisoners’ rights movement in the southern states, with the stain of slavery in their histories, used the slavery metaphor to advance their goals. Prisoners’ rights advocates such as the American Civil Liberties Union claimed that prisoners’ rights and the civil rights movement
were inseparable; in the summer of 1961 “when forty-five freedom riders, including James
Farmer, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), and John Lewis, spent thirty-nine days incarcerated
at Mississippi’s Parchman Prison Farm, the link between civil rights and prisoners’ rights was
forged” (Chase, 2015, p. 78). Numerous court decisions, combined with large numbers of prison
uprisings in the 1960s and 1970s protesting prisoner abuses, “successfully advanced the claim
that prisoners were not slaves” (Chase, 2015, p.85).

Civil Rights Movement, Social Programs, and the Carceral State. Although the
1950s and 1960s ushered in court decisions and legislation supporting civil rights, and several
African-Americans were appointed to prominent federal and judiciary positions, many African-
Americans sentenced prior to the new laws were trapped in prisons (The Sentencing Project,
2017b). Black people were seven times more likely to be incarcerated than Whites by the end of
the 1960s (Western & Pettit, 2010). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and resultant
equality laws did not create much real equality for Black people because “the same bureaucr
ats who enforced segregation now enforced civil rights laws, and they quickly established new
barriers to equality” (Cooper, 2013, p. 1193).

During Lyndon Johnson’s presidency (1963-1969), the killing of an unarmed fifteen-
year-old Black male by New York City police ignited the Harlem riot of 1964 and marked the
beginning of a turbulent period of uprisings in the Civil Rights Movement, with more than 250
incidents of urban civil disorder in which more than 200 Black people died (Hinton, 2015a).
Many politicians framed civil protest as a “breakdown in law and order… linking rebellion,
disobedience, and rising crime rates” (Kohler-Hausmann, 2015, p. 94) and appealing to fear of
crime and racial integration (Gottschalk, 2010). Gottschalk (2010) observed that “labeling
demonstrations and other acts of protests as crime is an age-old strategy to justify expansions of
law enforcement and delegitimize challenges to the prevailing political and economic order” (p. 64). The responses to the uprisings eventually resulted in merging anti-crime and anti-poverty programs intended to alleviate the oppressions of poverty (Kohler-Hausmann, 2015), changing the intended trajectory of Johnson’s Great Society. Johnson claimed that social deprivation and structural exclusion caused crime; therefore, the solution to high crime rates in impoverished communities was to initiate rehabilitative programs, which he attempted to do through the Great Society programs (Hinton, 2015a). The programs instead laid the groundwork for mass incarceration (Wacquant, 2010), as federal investments in many social welfare programs were diverted to fighting crime. Law enforcement tried to fill the void left by defunct War on Poverty programs (Hinton, 2015a). Thus, the anti-crime prong of the Great Society eventually dwarfed the anti-poverty prong and kept poor Black neighborhoods under surveillance (Wacquant, 2010). An especially disturbing outcome was that many politicians succeeded in establishing policies that labeled poor young Black children as ‘pre-delinquent,’ even if they had no arrest record (Hinton, 2015b), identifying them as ‘future criminals’ (Hinton, 2015b).

By the time Richard Nixon took office (1969-1974), a strong law enforcement infrastructure had been put in place under Johnson (Hinton, 2015a). Nixon rallied supporters with his call for law and order, coded rhetoric which is now well-known as the Southern Strategy, designed to incite Whites who resented Black equality (Cooper, 2013). As crime continued to rise in the 1970s, many policy makers were convinced that crime was to be expected in Black communities, due to ‘cultural pathologies’ and ‘inadequate parental supervision’ (Hinton, 2015b).

That belief was solidified as law with the first major piece of legislation signed by President Ford, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, transferring
delinquency programs from the authority of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to the Department of Justice (Hinton, 2015b). The act included a dangerous ‘potentiality clause’ that extended the reach of law enforcement into poor Black communities. It defined juvenile delinquency programs as any activities related to the “development of neglected, abandoned, or dependent youth or other youth who are potential criminals” (Hinton, 2015b, p. 815). It labeled all economically-disadvantaged children, the clear majority of whom lived in Black neighborhoods, as potential criminals. Thus, law enforcement and criminal justice institutions had authority over the lives of any child whose family received government assistance or who participated in urban social programs, furthering surveillance in poor Black segregated communities (Hinton, 2015b). The result was that, even though Black and White youth engaged in status offenses at rates reflecting the racial makeup of the general population, consequences were disproportionately doled out along racial and geographic divisions. As these disparities continued, as recently as 2015 Black youth were incarcerated at 5.03 times the rate of White youth (The Sentencing Project, 2017a). Consequently, incarceration has become a normalized part of the lives of Black men born in the 1970s and later (Western & Pettit, 2010).

**Carcerally-Oppressed Identities after the Civil Rights Movements.** Law and policy changes have occurred since the height of the various civil rights movements described above. Immigration deportation has continued to increase (Hernández, Muhammad, & Thompson, 2015; Hester, 2015). The advances of the prisoners’ rights movement were slowed significantly by a 1996 law placing restrictions on prisoner litigation (Chase, 2015) and others limiting prisoner education (Blumenson & Nilsen, 2002). The War on Drugs allowed incarceration to target Black people and other oppressed groups with precision (Cooper, 2013; The Sentencing Project, 2017b).
In the 1980s and 1990s, incarceration of low-income Mexican immigrant workers became a priority in law enforcement policy. Consequently, the number of Mexicans in federal custody increased from 3.6% in 1980 to 34.9% in 1999 (Hester, 2015, p. 147). According to Hester (2015), the United States had more than 250 immigrant detention centers to process its extraordinarily high number of deportations. The U. S. Border Patrol is the second largest police force in the United States, behind the New York City Police Department (Hernández, Muhammad, & Thompson, 2015).

The prisoners’ rights movement also experienced decline. In 1996, the Prison Litigation Reform Act was passed, severely curtailing prisoners’ access to litigation recourse with new stricter rules (Chase, 2015). Discouraging changes also occurred in prison education. Prior to the 1990s, there was general consensus that because incarcerated populations are substantially under-educated, education was a good use of their incarcerated time, so education was readily available to them (Blumenson & Nilsen, 2002). That changed with two zero-tolerance laws. Prior to those changes, Pell grants were almost the exclusive funding source of college prison programs. Pell funding ended with the 1994 Violent Crime Control Enforcement Act passed under President Clinton, which eliminated Pell grants for state and federal prisons and effectively ended college programs for prisoners (Blumenson & Nilsen, 2002). Four years later, the 1998 Drug Free Student Loans Act severely penalized students who had even petty drug convictions, suspending or permanently terminating federal student financial aid eligibility. Because the largest group of incarcerated people is from poor communities and convicted of low level drug charges, those financial aid restrictions helped maintain a disadvantaged underclass by denying access to higher education for those who need it most (Brandstetter, 2009).
Civil rights and social welfare after the civil rights movement also experienced some backsliding. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Blacks were increasingly targeted by law-and-order campaigns. President Reagan added to Nixon’s racially-coded rhetoric with his declaration of a War on Drugs in 1982, which in reality was a war on poor black and brown people and allowed for legal racial profiling (Cooper, 2013). According to Cooper (2013), “despite the fact that rates of drug use are essentially equal across races, black men are grossly disproportionately detained, charged, and incarcerated for petty drug offenses” (Cooper, 2013, p. 1188). A major effect of the drug war was the naturalization of the over-incarceration of Black men (Cooper, 2013). There is a relationship between scapegoating and economic insecurity (Gottschalk, 2010), which Reagan exploited through rhetoric that pitted poor Blacks and poor Whites against each other during a recession when people were losing jobs because they did not have the skills to compete in new job markets. Rates of imprisonment also tended to rise with rates of unemployment, whether crime was rising or not (Gottschalk, 2010).

When Clinton assumed his presidency, he signed welfare ‘reforms’ eliminating Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a federal program to assist families with children who were struggling with poverty, and replaced it with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), a federal program designed to help needy families attain self-sufficiency. TANF provided far less assistance than AFDC and was usually tied to employment requirements, resulting in a drop from 12.3 million to 4.4 million recipients of family welfare between 1996 and 2010 (Kohler-Hausmann, 2015). Thus, the links among poverty, unemployment, and incarceration were exacerbated.
Mental Illness and Incarceration

Reviewing the information above, it is easy to see connections and intersections among education, poverty, race, and incarceration. Impoverished neighborhoods tend to have sub-par public education and are overwhelmingly non-White, which translates to fewer employment opportunities and sustains the impoverished condition of the individual. When they are poorly-educated and have inadequate skills to access legitimate mainstream legal sources of income, people often feel forced into illegal means of eking out a livelihood to survive. If arrested, the education opportunities once provided in penal institutions have disappeared. Thus, incarcerated persons return to society after completing their sentences with the same inadequate levels of education as their first day of incarceration, and even fewer legitimate employment opportunities due to the stigma of their prison records. This cycle and social structure maintain a permanent underclass. People with mental illness often face those same structural barriers, in addition to ones created by their illness. For example, people with severe mental illness are more likely to be unemployed, live in poor communities, and not have adequate access to healthcare to treat their illness, often resulting in self-medicating with illegal drugs, followed by incarceration (Kinsler & Saxman, 2007).

According to Kohler-Hausmann (2015), the “three biggest psychiatric treatment institutions in the United States are the county jails in Los Angeles, New York City, and Chicago” (p. 91). Scholars have observed that the prison system in general is the largest mental health provider in the United States (Gilligan, 2001; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Kuehn, 2014). This hyper-incarceration of people with mental illness is, ironically, the result of deinstitutionalization of people with serious mental illnesses from state hospitals from the 1950s to 1980s, with the biggest push for deinstitutionalization having occurred in
the 1960s and 1970s (Gilligan, 2001; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Lee & Prabhu, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005). Deinstitutionalization peaked during the height of the Civil Rights movement when the spirit of protecting human rights and dignity was at the forefront of political and social awareness in the United States (LeCompte, 2015; Sultan, 2006; Yohanna, 2013).

An additional impetus for the push for deinstitutionalization was the development of new psychopharmaceutical drugs that offered hope for treating severe mental illness on an outpatient basis, allowing people with severe mental illness to live more free and normal lives (Gilligan, 2001; LeCompte, 2015; Rubinow 2014; Sultan, 2006; Testa & West, 2010). For example, the antipsychotic drug Chlorpromazine, sold as Thorazine, appeared to be so effective that it was reasonable to believe that people such as those with severe schizophrenia, who were once believed to require lifelong hospital confinement, could live and be productive within the community with proper care and treatment available on an outpatient basis (Testa & West, 2010). Further, treating people through a full spectrum of community-based options was projected to be more cost effective and less of a tax burden on the public (LeCompte, 2015; Yohanna, 2013).

Another catalyst for deinstitutionalization was several exposés, which revealed deplorable conditions of state mental hospitals and cruel and non-therapeutic treatment of the people in their care (LeCompte, 2015; Sultan, 2006; Yohanna, 2013). The exposés revealed that “the asylum life had actual anti-therapeutic effects on patients, often exacerbating patients’ conditions instead of curing them” (LeCompte, 2015, p.757). This outraged the public, who demanded an end to the inhumanity mental hospitals had devolved into, which was not what activist and reformer Dorothea Dix envisioned more than 170
years ago when she established asylums to humanely treat people suffering from severe mental illness (Gilligan, 2001; LeCompte, 2015; Sultan, 2006). In fact, somewhat counterintuitively, “before the middle of the twentieth century, persons suffering from mental illnesses who were committed to mental hospitals had no express right to treatment while they were institutionalized” (Rivera, 2005, p. 118). Instead, mental hospitals were warehouses for people whose needs the public believed were best served in institutions. However, after exposés about state mental hospitals revealed to the public how inhumanely the people in their care were treated, public opinion changed (Gilligan, 2001; LeCompte, 2015; Sultan, 2006; Yohanna, 2013). President Kennedy signed the Community Mental Health Centers Act (CMHC) in 1963 to facilitate deinstitutionalization of people with mental illness and provide appropriate community-based care for previously institutionalized people (Sultan, 2006; Testa & West, 2010).

Deinstitutionalization was intended to have two main parts: releasing people from state mental hospitals, and providing community-based services to meet their needs after release. Unfortunately, only the first part of deinstitutionalization was accomplished. Adequate funding was not allocated by communities for community-based care, even when funding was available (Gilligan, 2001; Lee & Prabhu, 2015), so people struggling with severe mental illness did not receive the treatment they needed (Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Sultan, 2006). According to Lee and Prabhu (2015), “In a recent three-year period alone, $4.35 billion in funding for mental health services was cut from state budgets across the nation” (p. 257). Although the CMCH Act (1963) was intended to achieve deinstitutionalization and shift substantial amounts of funding from supporting state mental hospitals to establishing community mental health resources, and some services were
funded, the full spectrum of services needed to serve this vulnerable population was not established (Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Sultan, 2006). The new community resources that were established had holes in them and were missing important parts to treat different mental health needs (LeCompte, 2015).

The new plans for community treatment often did not account for critical aspects of care: procuring suitable living situations upon patients’ release; arranging for the delivery of essential supportive services such as inpatient, outpatient, emergency, partial hospitalization, and consultation between state and federal policies and institutions to ensure continuity of care; developing measures of success for patients; and most importantly, providing adequate funding. (LeCompte, 2015, p. 758)

A high mentally-ill homeless population was one result of the failure to provide adequate community mental health treatment because many people who could not take care of themselves without treatment ended up living on the streets (French, 1987; Soderstrom, 2007; Yohanna, 2013). Further, the behaviors that are common and typical of many untreated severe mental illnesses increased police contact with mentally-ill people who were in crisis (Kuehn, 2014; Pustilnik, 2005; Sultan, 2006), resulting in as high as 40% of people with severe mental illness being caught in the criminal justice system at some time in their lives as a result of their untreated or undertreated mental illness (Pustilnik, 2005). With mental health hospitals nearly nonexistent, strict criteria for involuntary commitment to medical facilities that still served people with mental illness, and extremely limited and under-funded community resources for people with mental illness, arrest and imprisonment of people with mental illness increased as police officers acted as first responders to mentally-ill people in crisis (Kuehn, 2014; LeCompte, 2015; Sultan, 2006). There simply
was no other place to treat them, so jails and prisons became the default mental hospitals for people struggling with severe mental illness (Gilligan, 2001; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Kuehn, 2014; LeCompte, 2015). Police contact was also increased for people with mental illness who did not commit serious crimes and often did not commit crimes at all but engaged in “lifestyle crimes” such as vagrancy and drug and alcohol abuse that attracted police attention (LeCompte, 2015, p. 758). The result was that nationwide 30% to 40% of mentally-ill incarcerated people were held without any charges (Pustilnik, 2005), and jails and prisons became the largest mental health providers for the poor (Soderstrom, 2007). In fact, Pustilnik (2005) reported that according to the “2000 census of state and federal prisons…the primary or secondary function of over 150 prisons nationwide is mental health confinement” (p. 227). Similarly, Lee and Prabhu (2015) reported that:

…the proportion of people in this country who are currently housed in either a mental hospital or a correctional facility is almost the same as it was fifty years ago before the deinstitutionalization movement began, resulting in what is sometimes called “trans-institutionalization.” (Lee & Prabhu, 2015, p. 258)

Other reasons for over-incarceration of people with mental illness after mass deinstitutionalization occurred include various forms of misinformation about mental illness. A large portion of society believes that people with mental illness are more dangerous and criminogenic than the general public; neither is true (Gostin, 2008). However, evidence illustrating that people with mental illness are neither more dangerous nor more criminogenic than the rest of society (Gostin, 2008; Peterson, 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.) does not prevent politicians and policy makers from perpetuating myths that they are to justify and gain support for their agendas of
control (Gostin, 2008). Most violent crime is committed by people who do not have a diagnosable mental illness (Brekke, Prindle, Bae, & Long, 2001; Gostin, 2008; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.), and people with mental illness are many times more likely to be the victims of violent crime than perpetrators of it (Gostin, 2008; Sultan, 2006; Teplin, McClelland, & Weiner, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

Another factor that has contributed to the over-incarceration of people with mental illness after deinstitutionalization is the legal standard for mental health commitment (Testa & West, 2010; Yohanna, 2013). Other researchers agreed (Testa & West, 2010; Yohanna, 2013). The legal standards for commitment are strictly based on the criteria of the person with mental illness being a danger to him- or herself or others: “[U]nder standards based on dangerousness, the medical system will not intervene against a person’s wishes until he or she becomes suicidal, physically violent, or grossly unable to perform activities of daily living” (Testa & West, 2010, p. 34). This dangerousness criteria for commitment is the reason many people with serious mental illness end up homeless or dead when they cannot access treatment, or in crisis with law enforcement as their first responders instead of receiving needed mental health treatment before their illnesses escalate and attract police attention (Yohanna, 2013).

A troubling effect of the over-incarceration of people with mental illness is that their illnesses are being criminalized (Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Soderstrom, 2007). They are an extremely vulnerable population, many of whom have been victimized in the past and find themselves re-victimized with physical, psychological, or sexual abuse in the harsh prison environment (Gilligan, 2001; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Soderstrom, 2007). According to Soderstrom (2007), we are incarcerating the “poorest, often homeless, socially and
psychologically, educationally and vocationally, challenged individuals in our communities” (p. 5). Kinsler and Saxman (2007) observe that “we are incarcerating last generation’s abuse survivors, rather than treating them” (p. 84). They are also vulnerable to self-harm, as well as harm by others (Soderstrom, 2007). In prison, when they react in ways that are symptomatic of their illnesses, their actions are often misread by prison staff as deliberately defiant and noncompliant, often resulting in harsh consequences such as solitary confinement, which exacerbates their mental illness, instead of receiving treatment (Lee & Prabhu, 2015; Sultan, 2006).

After the public became aware of the neglectful and anti-therapeutic conditions of mental hospitals, in addition to the deinstitutionalization movement, several court cases resulted in rulings that were aimed at improving conditions for people with mental illness. Because so many of the neediest mentally-ill people were incarcerated as an eventual result of deinstitutionalization, many of those court rulings addressed the rights of mentally-ill people who are incarcerated. Some of the cases that have resulted in rulings establishing guidelines for the care and treatment of mentally-ill incarcerated people include Bowring v. Godwin (1977), Brown v. Plata (2011), Cooper v. Pate (1967), Estelle v. Gamble (1976), and Merriweather v. Sherwood (2002).

Cooper v. Pate (1967) established prisoners’ rights to sue in federal court (Chase, 2015). With the right to sue, it was possible for prisoners with mental health needs to petition the courts for mental health treatment. In Estelle v. Gamble (1976), the court ruled that prisoners are entitled to adequate medical care, and that “deliberate indifference to an inmate’s serious medical needs violates the Eighth Amendment and its prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment” (Rivera, 2005, p. 114). The Estelle court also ruled that because prisoners are deprived of their
freedom and therefore unable to access medical treatment for themselves, it is the state’s responsibility to provide adequate medical care for them, and not doing so constitutes deliberate indifference and violates the Eighth Amendment (LeCompte, 2015). A year later, *Bowring v. Godwin* (1977) extended the requirement of the state to provide psychiatric care to prisoners (Soderstrom, 2007). *Bowring* also clarified that prisoners only have a right to mental health treatment if they receive a diagnosis by a psychiatrist or psychologist of a serious mental illness that can be expected to respond to an established treatment and the treatment is medically-necessary (Rivera, 2005, p. 121).

In *Merriweather v. Sherwood* (2002), the court clarified the standard of treatment to which mentally-ill incarcerated people are entitled by establishing that “inmates do not have a right to the best possible mental health care, but merely reasonable care in accordance with the state’s minimum standards of mental health treatment” (Rivera, 2005, p. 120). In *Brown v. Plata* (2011) the court ruled that “adequate medical and mental health treatment are clearly necessities; severe suffering and death could result from deprivation of such treatment just as starvation and death could occur if one were not fed” (LeCompte, 2015, p. 761).

While court rulings that strive to improve the conditions of people with mental illness who are incarcerated are admirable, they are not adequate. Incarceration is non-therapeutic and can be very harmful to people with mental illness, particularly those with severe mental illness; more often than not, it worsens their illness (LeCompte, 2015; Lee & Prabhu, 2015; Sultan, 2006). Prisons and jails were not designed, staffed, or funded to provide appropriate treatment for people with severe mental illness, so it is not surprising that people with mental illness do not heal in prison, and often their conditions worsen (Lee & Prabhu, 2015). People with mental illness who are incarcerated are victimized at much higher rates than the general prison population (Sultan, 2006). They often lack adequate communication and interpersonal skills,
and often do not understand social cues and nuances that could help them establish relationships to help keep them safe from sexual and physical assault by other prisoners (Sultan, 2006).

Considering all the harms inflicted on people with mental illness in the prison environment, the best solution for dealing with mentally-ill people in crisis is treatment, not incarceration. Some prisons admirably try very hard to meet the needs of prisoners with mental illness, such as the Cook County jail in Illinois under the leadership of Sheriff Dart (Kuehn, 2014). Despite their best efforts they cannot do what they lack the resources to do and were not designed to do.

**Summary**

The United States has a history of the dominant social groups at any given time erecting barriers to freedoms for others when the dominant group perceives them as a competitive group threat or as undesirable in some way (Davis, 1998; Olzak & Shanahan, 2010). People with mental illness are one of the groups that have been subjected to those barriers to freedoms (Arrigo, 2001; Gilligan, 2001; Pustilnik, 2005). That way of responding to non-dominant groups has become so firmly-entrenched that it is difficult to change.

**Collateral and Human Consequences**

Collateral consequences are legally-imposed, post-release civil penalties in addition to the human and social consequences of incarcerated time. Collateral consequences of incarceration, or even the consequences of arrest without being incarcerated, affect individuals, families, and entire communities (Braman, 2004; Dyer, 2005; Raeder, 2012; Weiman, 2007). The post-release duration of collateral consequences and their reach into every aspect of life maintain an underclass of people who have little power to change them, which perpetuates inequality (Finzen, 2005; Kaiser, 2016; Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Wacquant, 2010).
Collateral and Human Costs to Individuals, Families, and Society

The effects of collateral consequences are generally much longer lasting than the prison sentence, limiting many life opportunities, which plays a role in re-incarceration (Ajunwa, 2015; Crane, 2016; Ewald, 2012; Kaiser, 2016). Gottschalk (2010) highlighted that the National Institute of Justice funded an American Bar Association study that “counted 38,000 statutes that impose consequences on people convicted of crimes” (p. 489). The severity and sheer number of collateral consequences make it virtually impossible for former prisoners to move out of the often dire economic and social conditions that contributed to their incarcerations in the first place. Human costs are associated with most collateral costs (Abramowicz, 2012; Allard, 2012; Blumenson & Nilsen, 2002; Cross, 2016; Dyer, 2005; Foster & Hagan, 2016; Raeder, 2012). Some collateral and human costs are described below.

Contact with family and support systems is very limited during incarceration, which makes it difficult to maintain the family bonds that will support reentry upon release (Abramowicz, 2012; Allard, 2012; Christian, 2005). Most prisoners are incarcerated far from their homes, making it difficult for their families to visit, because the distance creates financial and time burdens that interfere with maintaining contact (Allard, 2012; Braman, 2004; Christian, 2005). Even the cost of keeping in phone contact with the incarcerated person is prohibitively-high (Braman, 2004; Christian, 2005).

Because most incarcerated people have children (Foster & Hagan, 2016), a troubling consequence of incarceration is that the separation of incarcerated parents from their children creates an avalanche of effects for the children (Abramowicz, 2012; DeFina & Hannon, 2010; Raeder, 2012; Tasca, Mulvey, & Rodriguez, 2016; Uggen & McElrath, 2014). It disrupts a child’s ability to focus on school and other daily activities, and is detrimental to the child’s
stability and sense of security (Allard, 2012). Removing a parent who was providing for the family’s material needs creates great economic strain on families who are already the most economically-disadvantaged (Tasca, Mulvey, & Rodriguez, 2016). Child poverty is exacerbated even more by maternal incarceration, since children living in single parent homes are more likely to reside with working mothers than fathers (DeFina & Hannon, 2010). Over-incarceration of parents from disadvantaged communities reproduces socioeconomic inequality and perpetuates the marginalization that feeds the prison system (Foster & Hagan, 2016).

For many previously-incarcerated women, domestic violence is another factor in the collateral consequences they experience. Many domestic violence survivors are not able to access domestic violence services due to their prison records (Cross, 2016). They are also at risk for reincarceration because they are often unable to comply with the reentry requirements of their supervision due to interference from their abusive domestic partners (Cross, 2016). Reentering mothers also face restrictions on welfare programs that provide cash, food, and access to public housing that make self-sufficiency and family reunification more difficult (Cross, 2016). Unable to access domestic violence resources or welfare programs to help them establish independence, they are often forced to remain in abusive households with partners who actively undermine their successful reentry (Cross, 2016).

A prison record creates employment barriers. Race and geography also impact employment opportunities for previously incarcerated people (Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Patterson & Wildeman, 2015; Silva, 2010; Weiman, 2007). Those who find work often must use unreliable public transportation to travel long distances to their jobs (Weiman, 2007). Having a prison record also triggers hundreds of occupational license restrictions that further limit employment opportunities (Silva, 2010), and many are blanket restrictions that have no relation to the offense
for which the person was incarcerated (Finzen, 2005; Silva, 2010). The employment handicap of a prison record also has differential effects based on race, with Black people suffering more immediate, severe, and long-term effects than White people (Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Patterson & Wildeman, 2015).

**Mental Illness and Collateral and Human Costs**

People with mental illness who have been incarcerated are subjected to the collateral costs of a prison record discussed above, and those are often compounded by their mental illness. They may experience additional collateral consequences due to misunderstanding of their mental illness. Brekke et al. (2001) and Teplin et al. (2005) found that public misunderstanding of mental illness contributes to over-incarceration of people with mental illness in the first place. Both outside and inside of prison, people with mental illness are many times more likely to be victims than perpetrators of violent crime (Brekke et al., 2001; Gostin, 2008; Pustilnik, 2005; Soderstrom, 2007; Sultan, 2006; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). However, through the reporting of tragedies, such as the Newtown, Connecticut mass shooting at an elementary school, in which a person with severe mental illness killed many people, the public has a skewed view of the level of danger to society most people with severe mental illness represent (Brekke et al., 2001; Metzl & MacLeish, 2015). Metzl and MacLeish (2015) pointed out that people with mental illness are responsible for only 4% of violence in the United States. Conversely, for example, Brekke et al. (2001) found that people with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorders are “14 times more likely to be victims of violent crimes than to be arrested for one” (p. 1358). Inaccurate representations of the relationship between mental illness and danger to others fuel the public and political perceptions that the public needs to be protected from people with mental illness by isolating and punishing them (Brekke et al., 2001).
There are also high human costs to people with mental illness who are incarcerated. Prison staff with little or no training in working with people with mental illness often interpret their behaviors as refusal to comply and issue harsh punishments, such as solitary confinement (Lee & Prabhu, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005). Solitary confinement causes extreme distress for inmates with mental illness, and makes it difficult to deliver appropriate treatment options. For example, a counselor may have to conduct a therapy session through the door of a solitary confinement cell, violating confidentiality because the client and therapist cannot hear one another without raising their voices and risking others overhearing the therapy session (Lee & Prabhu, 2012).

Because correctional facilities do not have the staff or resources to provide adequate treatment for people with mental illness, inmates with mental illness are often released less healthy than when they arrived. There is a likelihood that their behaviors will attract police attention again and result in re-incarceration (Soderstrom, 2007). Due to their worsened mental condition, those who were initially incarcerated for nonviolent crimes are more likely to be incarcerated for violent crimes on subsequent incarcerations (Gilligan, 2001).

Another obstacle people with mental illness face post-release is that many of them have dual diagnoses of substance abuse and a mental illness, which confounds their treatment options. Many substance abuse treatment programs will not accept clients with a diagnosed mental illness, and many treatment programs for mental illness will not accept clients with substance abuse problems (Soderstrom, 2007). With no treatment options available for their co-occurring diagnoses, they are often caught in the prison system (Soderstrom, 2007). After release, the same dual diagnosis that prevented many of them from accessing both substance abuse treatment and mental health treatment through community treatment services is still present. Many people with mental illness who were prescribed medication while incarcerated are released with as little
as a week’s supply (Sultan, 2006). Their prescriptions run out while they wait to be seen by a psychiatrist in the community who can continue their prescriptions. Without needed medication, they are at higher risk of not being able to manage their behaviors to avoid police attention. Also, there are many psychotropic medications that are dangerous to discontinue abruptly, as they can cause serious negative effects (Howland, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Pustilnik, 2005). The lack of adequate treatment during incarceration and after release results in many people with mental illness cycling in and out of prison (Soderstrom, 2007; Pustilnik, 2005).

In addition to individual costs to people with mental illness, the large number of incarcerated people with mental illness has the effect of widespread disenfranchisement of this population. That limits their power to effect policy changes for themselves, while allowing billions of dollars of funding to continue to support their incarceration instead of being channeled to welfare and treatment programs that could help them (Lee & Prabhu, 2015).

Summary

Collateral and human consequences of incarceration, or an arrest without incarceration, are often more far-reaching than the incarceration or arrest. Their effects are not limited to the person who was incarcerated or arrested. They can limit life opportunities for individuals and families, and the political power and social capital of communities, for a very long time. People with mental illness can experience any or all of the collateral consequences of other groups, in addition to those caused by their mental health conditions. When their mental illness is worsened by incarceration, people with mental illness are at risk of cycling in and out of prison with little hope of becoming healthier.
The Prison Reform Continuum

Many scholars and activists describe prison reform and prison abolition as two distinct ways of approaching reform (Byrd, 2016; McLeod, 2015). It may be more accurate to think of them as the two ends on the continuum of reform (Jackson & Meiners, 2010). However, conceptualizing reform and abolition as two different approaches, even though it is not quite that simple, is helpful in discussing some differences in prison reform activists’ ideals, goals, and approaches.

Prison Reform and Abolition in General

Among those who follow the development and state of criminal justice the United States, there is virtually no disagreement that the current overly-punitive system does not work on many levels – fiscal, crime deterrence, social welfare, or public safety (Allard, 2012; Byrd, 2016; Davis, 2003; Earle, 2015; Gottschalk, 2016; Lamberti et al., 2001; McLeod, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005). However, critics of incarceration differ on what changes are needed, including points of intervention to achieve expedient and optimal results (Davis, 2003; Doob & Webster, 2014; Gottschalk, 2016; Lenn, 2011; Lynch, 2014; Tonry, 2014).

Many scholar-activists on the abolitionist end of the continuum claim that most reformist reforms backfire and strengthen the punitive grip of criminal justice rather than working toward dismantling it because they work within a penal framework and language rather than challenging its legitimacy (Allard, 2012; Ben-Moshe, 2013; Byrd, 2016; Davis, 2003; Earle, 2015; Gilligan, 2015; Knopp & Regier, 1976; McCarter, 2017; McLeod, 2015). They cite as evidence reforms such as probation in lieu of incarceration for misdemeanor offenses, release with electronic monitoring, mental health courts, and reentry programs, which increase the prison’s reach well beyond its brick and mortar (Byrd, 2016; Crane, 2016). For this reason, abolitionist reformers
advise caution to those suggesting reform agendas. Abolitionist reformers do not work within the prison paradigm; they challenge its moral legitimacy, humanity, effects on individual and social good and safety, and even its efficacy. They do not believe a better system can be built on the foundation of the dysfunctional and inhumane one we now have, because the goal is not a ‘kinder gentler prison system’ but rather no prison (Davis, 2003; Earle, 2015; Gilligan, 2015; Lenn, 2011; McLeod, 2015). Thus, influencing others to seriously consider a different way of thinking about justice that does not have a punitive option, but is instead totally rehabilitative and supportive, is a critical component of abolitionist reformers’ work.

Reformist and abolitionist prison activists are not necessarily polar opposites, and many advocate a blending of reformist and abolitionist strategies to achieve optimal and expedient results (Gottschalk, 2016). Even some abolitionists advocate complementary, simultaneous reform and abolition agendas to move more fluidly and quickly toward the ultimate goal of abolition (Gottschalk, 2016; Greene et al., 2013; Soderstrom, 2006). Most reformers on either end of the continuum agree that the root-causes approach of removing social structures that promote incarceration, which aligns more with abolitionist reform goals, is essential to achieving meaningful, transformative change. Many differ on whether other reform strategies that work toward abolition should be part of root-causes reform because complete change of social structures that maintain the prison paradigm will take an extremely long time to achieve (Gottschalk, 2016). Meanwhile, people will remain trapped in prisons, including those who might not have been if a two-pronged root-causes (abolition) and reform approach had been used rather than a singular focus on eliminating root causes of mass incarceration through structural changes (Gottschalk, 2016).
An interesting dialogue was sparked by an article written by Tonry (2014), which presented ten steps for ending mass incarceration. Although many reformers and abolitionists agreed in theory with Tonry’s ten steps, they are viewed by many as too technically-focused to have the emotional impact necessary to influence people who are not already advocating for prison reform, especially more abolitionist reforms. For example, Doob and Webster (2014) pointed out the importance of culture in achieving decarceration. Their research showed that two very different societies comprise the United States, one with high incarceration rates and capital punishment, and the other, which they identified as nonviolent Canadian-style justice, with low incarceration rates and no capital punishment. To advance transformative change in these two different types of United States societies, Doob and Webster suggested that “special attention be given to the political, historical, and cultural realities of each state (or groupings of states)” (2014, p. 557). They claimed that Tonry’s (2014) ten steps to decarceration, such as repealing mandatory minimum sentencing laws and cutting in half the 2014 number of people in legal custody by 2020, provide good technical solutions, but what is missing is a way to tap into the emotional and symbolic dimensions of social justice to create a will to change it.

Many reformers on both ends of the reform continuum believe practical arguments will not influence people to support or create transformational change (Doob & Webster, 2014). They recognize the public’s numbness to the prison system and a need to reach people on deep emotional, human, and ethical levels to generate change momentum (Lenn, 2011). They claim change will be much more difficult to achieve without reaching the public on those deep levels.

**Prison Reform and Abolition Concerning People with Mental Illness**

Arrigo (2001) saw the continued over-incarceration of people with mental illness, despite alternatives that are more effective, as a function of hegemonic language: “[T]he language of
the courtroom excludes certain voices and ways of knowing” (p. 31). This goes to the heart of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and excavating subjugated voices and knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Ben-Moshe, 2011). Arrigo (2001) claimed that the way society communicates about mental illness using medico-legal language has a strong influence on maintaining incarceration as the primary means of addressing severe mental illness. Part of the abolition solution according to this reasoning is “to transcend the imposed parameters of this uni-accentuated speech … in ways more fully affirming of unencumbered language and multi-accentuated desire” (Arrigo, 2001, p. 43). In a similar vein, Byrd (2016) cautioned against the use of medical language, as it implies that the changes needed are solely the responsibility of the individual rather than dysfunctional social structures, which truncates transformational social justice change. Such thinking supports the legal-normative standard, which erroneously evaluates many behaviors symptomatic of mental illness that deviate from legal norms as a failure of individual responsibility, and the law punishes deviance from what is ‘normal’ (Byrd, 2016; Earle, 2015; McLeod, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005).

Several scholars noted the great discrepancy between the persistence of incarceration and any benefits it provides for society (Braman, 2004; Earle, 2015; McLeod, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005; Sultan, 2006). The vast majority of people with mental illness who are institutionalized are held in jails and prisons; most of those are nonviolent, and 30% to 40% of them have no legal charges pending against them (Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Pustilnik, 2005). That response to a person experiencing a mental health crisis, even a violent one, is inappropriate and harmful (Gilligan, 2015; Soderstrom, 2007; Sultan, 2006). Many prison reformers advocate against incarceration of people with mental illness, even the most severely or violently mentally-ill (Gilligan, 2015; Lamberti et al., 2001; Sultan, 2006; Yohanna, 2013). Those reformers understand that there are
a dangerous few people who will not be able live in society because of the danger they pose to others, and some others whose mental illness is so debilitating that they cannot function without a great deal of mental health support (Lamberti et al., 2001; Sultan, 2006; Yohanna, 2013). However, those reformers do not believe the solution is locking them in cages, as is the current practice (Byrd, 2016; Gilligan, 2015; McLeod, 2015; Sultan, 2006).

The harms of incarceration are not transparent to the public (Lee & Prabhu, 2015; McLeod, 2015; Sultan, 2006). Perhaps if the public was aware of the harms of incarceration that are inflicted on people with mental illness today, they might be as outraged by their treatment as the public was by the treatment of people with mental illness in state mental hospitals of the 1950s through 1970s that led to their demise. Therefore, many prison reformers underscore the need to educate the public and appeal to them on emotional, ethical, moral, and human rights levels (Lenn, 2011; McLeod, 2015).

Gilligan (2015), a preeminent psychiatrist and scholar with decades of experience working successfully with violent mentally-ill people, stated that even for the dangerous few people who cannot safely live in society, a therapeutic model is far safer and more effective than incarceration and punishment for all stakeholders. Gilligan (2015) claimed that incarceration is futile and increases violence among those already so inclined and offered a unique alternative to incarceration for the dangerous few who require separation from general society:

Rather than … pursuing the futile goal of reforming our unreformable prisons and jails, I would propose that we create an entirely new type of secure… residential college and therapeutic community that could function as a human development center, in which to enable those… who have suffered (and caused others to suffer) from the physical, emotional and cognitive abuse and deprivation… Modern medicine became scientific and
effectively therapeutic only with the invention of “teaching hospitals” run by schools of medicine, which have three purposes: treatment of the sick, training of those who treat the sick, and research into the causes and cures of sickness. I am proposing that we establish a corresponding new type of residential facility, analogous to a teaching hospital... for the treatment, education and social reintegration into the community of those whom we now punish in prisons ... I believe it would be less likely to be assimilated into the old and unworkable paradigm of prisons if we were to think of it... as a center for human development [rather than a teaching prison]. (Gilligan, 2015, p. 147)

Review of the scholarly literature citing the many harms of incarcerating people with mental illness supports Gilligan’s vision of how to address the issue of violent mentally-ill people because it would be more beneficial to all parties. People with mental illness would receive appropriate treatment that does not worsen their illness. As a result, society would likely enjoy more safety from violent mentally-ill offenders. The plan would also produce highly-trained professionals with high-level skills to help those with severe violent mental illness (Brekke et al., 2001; Gostin, 2008; Lee & Prabhu, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005; Soderstrom, 2007; Sultan, 2006; U. S. Department of Health and Human Service, n.d.).

Summary

Reform and abolition are part of a continuum of prison reform activism. Abolitionist reforms appear to be most applicable for addressing the over-representation of people with mental illness in jails and prisons. Such reforms would provide, instead of incarceration, a full range of high quality community-based services with linkages among them that provide a seamless experience for those accessing them, and which are available to anyone who needs them, regardless of income or health insurance coverage. For the dangerous few individuals who
require segregation from society, it would entail establishing humane treatment facilities, perhaps designed as communities in a teaching-campus style, as suggested by Gilligan (2015).

**Relational Activism**

The term *relational activism* is not a specifically-named, widely-recognized ‘official’ theory or activist strategy per se, but the idea of using relationships to advance activist goals has been used in various social causes (Bradley, Maschi, & Gilmore, 2007; Cherry, 2006; Macias & Williams, 2016). Numerous scholars of social movements have researched what this study terms relational activism (Diani, 2009; Granovetter, 1973; Kraemer, 2007; Malhorta & Pérez, 2005; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993 & 2009; VanderPlaat, 1999). O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy (2010) coined the term relational activism and described features that concisely pull together the most salient attributes of the power of relational work in social movements presented by many other scholars into a concept that can be studied and applied in the context of this research study. The four key features of O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy’s (2010) relational activism can be summarized as:

1. It is embedded in daily practices and leads by example.

2. It intentionally attempts to build or enhance relationships with people who do not already share one’s views in order to influence change.

3. It is committed to long-term relational engagement to bring about lasting change.

4. It bridges the private and public spheres of activism because more overt conventional activism relies on its behind-the-scenes relationship-building activities.

Relational approaches to activism are widely accepted by scholars of social movements (Kraemer, 2016; Macias & Williams, 2016; Passy, 2009; Simmons, 2008). Since Granovetter’s (1973) groundbreaking work, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” many scholars have investigated
how relationships impact social movements (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Cherry, 2006; McAdam, 2009; VanderPlaat, 1999; Walgrave & Wouters, 2014). Both strong and weak ties are important for social movements to expand their reach and effectiveness (Diani, 2009; Macias & Williams, 2016; Mische, 2009; Walgrave & Wouters, 2014). Social movements that lack weak ties do not grow and transcend their dense in-degree networks, and therefore their ability to create social change is truncated (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Diani, 2009; McAdam, 2009; Walgrave & Wouters, 2014). That occurs because individuals with strong ties in a social movement are more likely to share other strong ties, and thus, new information is not spread beyond the network of individuals who are already on board with the desired change; conversely, weak ties serve as bridges to other, sometimes conflicting, movements or movement factions and potential actors to spread the movement, or at least work in alliance on limited actions or projects (Diani, 2009; Macias & Williams, 2016; Malharta & Pérez, 2005; McAdam, 2009; Mische, 2009; Passy, 2009).

For social movements to grow and have maximum social-change impact, they require leader members who function in two different but complementary roles: leaders and brokers (Diani, 2009). In social movements, members tend to prefer a less formal and hierarchical leadership style; however, there is still a need for important ‘traditional’ leadership functions, such as being the public representatives of their movements and building and sustaining dense in-degree networks of committed actors (Diani, 2009). Brokers in a movement network, on the other hand, may not have much of a public image, but their bridging role is crucial to the expansion of the movement, as they have the “capacity to attract support from SMOs [social movement organizations] with different world-views” (Diani, 2009, p. 118), as well as resources that might be shared. Other scholars who study social movements echo the importance of
bridging/brokerage in building momentum and social capital in social movements; they acknowledge that bridging/brokerage is usually accomplished through weak ties (Baldassarri and Diani, 2007; Malhorta & Pérez, 2005; McAdam, 2009; Walgrave & Wouters, 2014). Baldassarri and Diani (2007) describe the complementary roles of leadership, which fosters closure, and brokerage, which fosters network expansion, as follows:

In general terms, while brokerage improves vision through the circulation of information and new ideas and mediates between alternative positions, network closure results, among other things, in the strengthening of social relations and the enforcement of group norms. Closure and brokerage are complementary to each other in the production of social capital. (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007, p. 771)

The brokerage/bridging function aligns with two of O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy’s (2010) relational activism features: attempting to build or strengthen relationships with people who do not already share one’s views in order to influence change, and bridging the private and public spheres by serving as the behind-the-scenes relationship-building foundation on which more overt conventional activism relies. In addition to examining the effects of directly building bridges to potential activists, part of the brokerage/bridging capacity that this study also examines is whether social justice activists can build a relational bridge that their audiences are willing to cross in the absence of in-person interactions with incarcerated people. Intersectional awareness may make that possible: one person’s experience of marginalization might engender empathic support for another person with a different marginalized identity, which in this study is people with mental illness. This would align with Malhorta and Pérez’s (2005) intersectionality concept of bridging to consciousness. Intersectionality is strongly related to the concept of brokerage/bridging. Supporting the bridging to consciousness function, Lenn (2011) stated that:
We, as abolitionists, have to recognize that the public generally does not conceive of prisoners as whole persons who are privileged to full moral consideration… At its most basic level, then, the call for the abolition of prisons is for the emancipation of us all to recognize the full humanity of each member in our society… Our task as abolitionists is to reassert the value of all humanity, demonstrate the moral, racial, class, and other injustices that the prison-industrial complex inflicts on us all. It is then when we can build a major movement, aimed at the benefit of all humanity, to abolish prisons. (Lenn, 2011, p. 347)

Thus, influencing others to participate in activism may involve, in part, creating or emphasizing shared identities between activists and their audiences and, when the audience is not also the oppressed group, between the audience and the oppressed group, or at least recognizing some commonalities that can be used to create a relational foundation for joining the movement (Curtin, Stewart, & Cole, 2015; Kraemer, 2007; Passy, 2009). Therefore, intersectional awareness is essential to forming allies and creating solidarity in a social movement, especially because various intersecting identities are not mutually exclusive (Kraemer, 2007).

McAdam (2009) found that diffusion or rage (his terms for brokerage), attribution of similarity, and emulation are important dynamics in moving a person toward participating in coordinated action in a movement. Information about an action of a social movement is spread through diffusion or rage, which triggers some people who receive the information to identify with the movement (attribution of similarity), which in turn leads them to emulate the movement’s actions (McAdam, 2009). These ideas align with O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy’s tenets of leading by example (emulation) and creating relationships with dissimilar others (diffusion and rage) to further the movement agenda. The dynamic of attribution of similarity
aligns with the concept of building relationships based partly on shared identities (intersectionality). Along the lines of emulation, and in agreement with O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy’s (2010) relational activism tenet of leading by example through everyday practices, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) claimed that leadership is enacted in everyday practices. Bradley, Maschi, and Gilmore (2007, p. 26) articulated the concept of leading by example through daily practices as, “Everyday experiences can be interpreted as indicators or calls to principles, values or concerns.” Diani (1992, p. 6) claimed that social movement is “submerged in everyday life.” McAdam (1993, p. 663) claimed that when the relationship-building “processes of identity amplification and identity/movement linkage take place, activism is likely to follow.”

The attributes of O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy’s (2010) relational activism framework are supported and validated by the social movement scholars’ work described in this section. O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy’s (2010) conceptualization of relations in social movements concisely translates and streamlines a body of scholarship on the roles of relationships in social movements.

**Rationale**

Incarceration is taken for granted in the United States. Reinforcing that attitude is its long segregationist historical foundation (Davis, 1998; Escobar, 2015; Gottschalk, 2010; Hester, 2015; Western & Pettit, 2010). Incarceration is such an embedded part of the social and political fabric of the United States that many people cannot imagine a world without it (Davis, 2003; Lenn, 2011; McLeod, 2015). It is that embeddedness that presents a great challenge to criminal justice activists. To create momentum for change, an enormous amount of educating the public is needed. Although removing structural oppressions is the ultimate solution to achieve more meaningful and transformative changes, for that to occur, activists must connect with the public
on emotional, ethical, moral, human rights, and cultural dimensions to create a public will to remove the structural oppressions. This education needs to include information about collateral and human costs to the incarcerated person, their family, and society.

The over-representation of people with mental illness in penal institutions is particularly troubling because it represents the criminalization of their illness rather than humane and ethical health treatment for those struggling with it. Without transparency in the criminal justice system, one cannot blame an uninformed public for not getting involved in advocating for the incarcerated population or people with mental illness. The education of the public through relationship-building strategies that include forming alliances and coalitions, bridgework and brokerage, and using intersecting shared identities to build connections may be a means to build momentum to achieve transformational prison reform for people with mental illness (Doob & Webster, 2014; Gottschalk, 2016; Lamberti, et al., 2001).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented historical background on the development of incarceration in the United States to provide a sense of how embedded the penal system is in the culture, including historical background on incarceration of people with mental illness. It provided context for understanding why the penal system is so resistant to change, as well as history and background knowledge about various identities that are relevant to the intersectional perspective of the research study. A close look at the complexity of collateral and human consequences revealed harms reaching far beyond prison walls and into the lives and futures of everyone touched by penal actions, and how those harms are often compounded by mental illness. The prison reform continuum was presented, with justification for preferring abolitionist reform strategies for people with mental illness. Relational activism was discussed as a possible strategy to create
momentum to achieve transformational change in the criminal justice system. Relational activism and intersectionality theory share common ideas about creating social justice change, such as working to cross social divides to form linkages and alliances for collective action. Activists have been fighting for transformative change in incarceration practices for decades with little success. Perhaps new approaches are needed. Relational activism in combination with intersectional awareness may be a potential strategy to advance prison reform for people with mental illness.

The next chapter will discuss the research methodology used for this study. It will describe how this study explored the effectiveness of using relational activism and intersectionality in prison abolition work.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this research study was to explore the relationship among intersectional awareness, identity, and criminal justice reform activists’ abilities to influence others through relational activism. The study employed a narrative inquiry approach within a critical research paradigm and applied intersectional analysis to the data. The research questions that were investigated are:

1. How do connections built between activists and their audiences influence their audiences’ receptiveness to prison reform for people with mental illness?

2. How do identities prison reform activists share with their audiences mediate their ability to build connections with their audiences?

3. Where do prison activists fall on the prison reform continuum regarding people with mental illness?

**Qualitative Research**

Many different research approaches fall under the umbrella of qualitative research (Ponterotto, 2005). There is no one ‘best’ approach to qualitative research, and no single approach is privileged over the others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Qualitative research is used in studies that are focused on understanding, not controlling and predicting (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). It supports multiple realities as interpreted by the participants, and does not focus on a single objective reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Qualitative researchers maintain that objective truth does not exist (Ponterotto, 2005).

All researchers, regardless of their quantitative or qualitative stance, inject bias into their research through every decision they make about their studies, so total objectivity is unattainable.
(Nygreen, 2006; Ponterotto, 2005). Researcher bias is present in the decision to conduct a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method study. It is present in the questions selected for study and the selection of participants being studied, the sampling strategy, and the selection of the research approach, methodology, and paradigm. For these reasons, qualitative researchers argue that no research is without bias, although researchers can bracket their biases to avoid weakening the quality and rigor of the study (Jankowski, 2000; Ponterotto, 2005).

A research paradigm is a set of beliefs and assumptions that provides a foundation for the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Ponterotto, 2005). Selecting a research paradigm is an important first step of research planning that guides the rest of the study (Ponterotto, 2005). This qualitative study operates from a critical-ideological research paradigm using a narrative inquiry research approach within an intersectionality theoretical framework. The paradigm, research approach, and theoretical framework were selected for how well they complement each other and support the purposes of this study.

**Critical-Ideological Research Paradigm**

Critical researchers perceive the social world as being made of unequal power differentials (Malhorta & Pérez, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). The hallmarks of critical-ideological research are its critique of dominant social discourses that oppress non-dominant groups and its goal of supporting oppressed groups in ways that spur them to act and create transformative and emancipatory change for themselves (Ponterotto, 2005). Critical research is concerned with shifting the power differentials that create and perpetuate injustice in order to promote social justice. It also has an idiographic and emic orientation and is not intended to create generalizable applications to large groups of people (Ponterotto, 2005), although it may offer possible applications to specific contextually-situated groups (Chase, 2011). Another distinguishing
feature of critical-ideological research is that the researcher’s positionality is an integral part of the research and is made clear to the participants and readers (Charmaz, 2017; Ponterotto, 2005). According to Charmaz (2017), “Critical theory usually begins from a researcher’s explicit value position that defines the meaning of the research question in advance of conducting the study” (p. 35). Parkin (1996) claimed, “Critical theory…consciously seeks to bring about a radical transformation of the existing social structure” (p. 417). Ponterotto (2005) stated, “The reader can see the impact and influence of the researcher’s proactive values in critical theory, a characteristic that is in marked contrast to the positivist and postpositivist paradigms” (p. 130).

Positionality

It seems to me that anyone who has been drawn to a career in education is social-justice-oriented. I suppose that was the attraction for me in becoming a special education teacher and mental health counselor. Although there was a time when I believed K-12 special education was my social justice niche or purpose, it no longer fits. That is not a devaluing of the field, and in fact, my special education teaching experiences certainly have contributed to the developing realization that my social justice path lies elsewhere.

The different contexts of my experiences as an educator provided me abundant opportunities to witness the intersectional oppressions and privileges that come into play in criminal justice. The fact that far more disabled than nondisabled, more African-American and Latino than White, more poor than middle class, more mentally-ill than non-mentally-ill, more poorly-educated than well-educated people are incarcerated was, for me, more than just words read or heard in a news report, scholarly article, or book. I saw it happen. For example, years ago when I taught incarcerated men, many of whom were African-American fathers who, as children, were placed in the same residential school for children with serious emotional and
learning disabilities in which I had previously taught, it was not difficult to make connections between marginalized groups and incarceration.

The dysfunction of our criminal justice system is multi-systemic. Multiple dysfunctional systems feed and perpetuate the uber-system of dysfunction that we have the audacity to call criminal ‘justice.’ Viewing the situation from the many different angles provided through my various educator experiences, I came to understand single criminal justice and prison reforms or ‘fixes’ as wholly inadequate. The dysfunction must be addressed multi-systemically, holistically, or efforts to cure the dysfunction, injustice, and inhumanity will fail. It was easy to see from my ringside seat that maintaining or increasing the current rate of incarceration does not benefit society or keep it safe. It does not rehabilitate. It does not address the human problems that contributed to the incarcerations.

My positionality is especially relevant to this study, which examines the research problem through an intersectional lens. I need to recognize my own intersecting identities and how they may impact the study, and examine how I define myself in relation to others, especially in terms of power and privilege. Takacs (2002) suggested that to create a socially-just world, we need to first “understand how we are positioned in relation to others – as dominant/subordinate, marginal/center, empowered/powerless” (p. 169). That is a good place to start, but I don’t think our relations to others can always be described in dichotomous terms. An intersectional perspective allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of power relationships. Nevertheless, Takacs’ (2002) idea that researchers need to understand their positions in relation to others is at the heart of the intersectional lens used for this research, as I must not let my own intersecting identities, both dominant and marginalized, bias the study results, given that this study explores how intersecting identities of participants mediate openness to prison reform. I
took steps to ensure that the mediating effects of the participants’ intersecting identities, not mine, are reported as accurately as possible.

I also share Briscoe’s (2005) perspective that each person’s positionality is too rich and diverse to compartmentalize into limiting or static categories. That richness of positionality is what enables a researcher to identify with and understand other people enough to honor their voices in the research. That aspect of positionality supports the relational dimension that was examined in this research. Briscoe’s (2005) discussion about who is qualified to represent whom in research is a dilemma I have often pondered. I agree with her point that because we each have so many positionalities that overlap and intersect with those of others, we are qualified to represent others in research if we take care to honor their voices. I also strongly agree that limiting our research to researching only those who mirror a narrowly-defined version of our own positionality, or identity, exacerbates the problem of oppression by not representing a more diverse chorus of voices. That is why I feel so strongly about advocating for people with prison records and other marginalized groups, even though I cannot claim to have shared all their experiences. Further, I believe that differences in positionality among scholar-activists can work in favor of advocating for oppressed and marginalized groups. By collaborating in activism with people of diverse positionalities, or intersecting identities, researchers who want to be change agents can have a powerful impact. Audiences who may dismiss a message of change from one scholar-activist because of differences in positionality or identity may readily accept the same message delivered by another because of perceived shared positionalities or identities. That idea of using one’s different identities to promote change is at the heart of this research study exploring relational activism in prison reform work.
Narrative Inquiry and Intersectionality

The primary purpose of this study was to examine how identities mediate prison reform activists’ success with using relational activism (RA) strategies. While narrative inquiry’s somewhat longer time-spanning stories shared by participants are not necessary to examine many phenomena, they are particularly germane to examining RA, because one of RA’s features is long-term relational engagement to bring about change (Macias & Williams, 2016; O’Shaugnessy & Kennedy, 2010). Therefore, participants were asked to describe how some of their relationships with their audiences developed over time to enable them to achieve some degree of success in influencing their audiences to adopt reform attitudes and actions.

The stories shared by participants in this narrative inquiry provided the personal histories that paint a detailed and nuanced picture of each participant’s intersecting identities, which in turn provided a detailed and nuanced picture of the interactions of those identities with the phenomenon of RA. Identities and world views are not developed in a vacuum. Context is integral to narrative inquiry, so life chronologies covering more time than various other research approaches are essential to fully understand participants’ experiences and identities (Bamberg, 2004; Chase, 2011; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Narrative inquiry takes into account the role of history in the development of the participants’ identities and world views. It situates the participants’ experiences in time and place, contextualizing and providing particularities about identity development (Bruner, 1991; Chase, 2011; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Researchers who use intersectionality are usually concerned with social justice and unequal power differentials that privilege and oppress (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Malhorta & Pérez, 2005; Souto-Manning, 2014). They examine the intersections of power and identity to expose oppression and social injustice to stimulate dialogue and change (Christensen & Jensen, 2012;
Narrative inquiry is often used to advance social justice change (Chase, 2011; Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005). Narrative inquiry has a sense of urgency compared to other forms of qualitative research and describes several different forms of urgency (Chase, 2011): The urgency of speaking refers to the potential healing power of telling one’s story. The urgency of being heard refers to the other’s need to be represented. The urgency to speak and be heard are related and serve to engage others in empathic listening to encourage social justice change. The urgency of collective stories refers to oppressed and marginalized groups telling their collective stories as a way of demanding social change. Considering the above qualities of narrative inquiry and intersectionality, they worked well together for examining this study’s research questions.

Much qualitative research uses a narrative approach to gathering data. However, narrative inquiry is a specific way of approaching research that is not to be confused with other forms of narrative or a generic conception of narrative research (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The essence of narrative inquiry is a story worth telling that has a history and chronology, a context and situatedness, and particularly of culture or location, all of which impact the fluid identity of the narrator and the meanings the narrator interprets from his or her story (Bamber, 2004; Bruner, 1991; Chase, 2011; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Neither identity nor meaning are static, but are constantly engaged in hermeneutic refinement and re-creation. (Bamber, 2004; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

Because identity and meaning are always in process, this can present a dilemma for researchers: at some point the researcher must evaluate whether enough data have been gathered and interpreted to reasonably answer the research questions, as more data and analysis can always be performed. Seidman (2013a) cautioned against ending coding too soon so the
researcher does not overlook important connections and emerging themes for the analysis. Nevertheless, the researcher must use her or his best judgment in determining when the coding is refined enough to produce a solid analysis.

Based on the descriptions shared in this section, narrative inquiry was selected as the methodology and intersectionality theory was selected as the theoretical framework for this study. They have many qualities that work well together to deeply explore and address the research questions.

**Participants**

The participants who were interviewed for this research study were activists who advocate for criminal justice reform. Five criteria were used for selecting participants:

1. **Demographically-diverse**, as much as possible, in the areas of race, gender, socio-economic class, and educational attainment level.

2. **Awareness of patterns of over-representation in incarceration in the United States**.

3. **Awareness of patterns of incarceration among people with mental illness**.

4. **Attitude of support for prison reform for people with mental illness**.

5. **History of at least one instance of prison reform activism at any level**.

For purposes of participant selection, activism was defined as any effort to influence or educate others with a pro-reform message that advocates for reducing incarceration in the United States. The activism could be as low key as talking to a friend in casual conversation about needed changes or signing a Care2 online petition, or as overt as organizing and/or participating in rallies and protests.

This study used purposive sampling and sought to identify 8 to 12 participants. Because potential participants might or might not identify as prison reform activists when asked directly,
a screening survey was developed to administer to potential participants. The survey was designed to identify pro-reform attitudes as defined by the study, even if the potential participants did not previously think of their views in those terms. The survey was designed to target each of the five criteria described above for inclusion in the study. It can be found in Appendix B. The weights assigned to each response, as well as eligibility criteria based on response weights, can be found in Appendix C.

A brief email was sent to potential participants inviting them to participate in the screening survey. All participants resided in the Southeast in suburban and urban areas. Some participants were originally from urban areas in the Northeast. An unsigned informed consent form was the first screen of the screening survey, which was accessed through an emailed link. The persons selected to receive the initial emails were identified by the researcher (coworkers, acquaintances, or professionals in various fields) who expressed awareness of what they believe are flaws in criminal justice in the United States. The email invitation to participate in the screening survey was purposely minimal in the detail it initially provided about the study in order to gather authentic responses from potential participants about their orientation toward criminal justice reform for people with mental illness. Providing too much detail at the screening phase could have risked influencing respondents to reply one way or another. Complete details about the study were thoroughly explained to selected participants, including why they were selected. Snowball sampling was also used, in which referrals were requested from the initial group of selected participants, to locate a sufficient purposive sample for the study.

Methodology

The primary source of data was interviews, which were analyzed through the lens of intersectionality. This means examining whether patterns emerged in which identities
(race/ethnicity, education level, socioeconomic class, gender, or other identities) of activists and their audiences co-occur more frequently in some combinations than others in terms of activists’ ability to influence their audiences. A narrative inquiry approach of in-depth interviews was used to collect data. An intersectional analysis of the data was developed from recursive rounds of coding.

**Data Collection**

There were three sources of data collection for this study. Demographic data collected in the screening survey allowed for a diverse sample of participants to be selected to facilitate analyzing the possible role of intersecting identities in successful use of relational activism approaches in prison reform. The second source of data collection was individual interviews.

The selected participants were invited to participate in individual audio-recorded interviews. To create an environment conducive to building rapport and having comfortable conversation, each participant chose a time and meeting place (Rubin & Rubin, 2012a). A copy of the Signed Informed Consent Form was provided to each participant, along with a verbal explanation of the form; each participant was asked to sign the form. Part of the Informed Consent document required the participant to select a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. The initial interviews were 40 to 90 minutes in length. Follow-up interviews were planned and estimated to be 20 to 40 minutes. However, most participants elected phone or email follow-up. The researcher’s contact information was provided to each participant should they have questions or want to amend, add to, or delete any of their responses, or drop out of the study. Nobody who agreed to participate in the study dropped out.

Each interview was transcribed and shared with the individual participant via email. After having time to reflect on his or her interview responses, each participant was invited to
participate in a follow-up interview, or email or phone follow-up, if they identified any errors in the transcript. Corrections to the transcript were made if the participant identified any errors. This was an important part of the hermeneutic process of narrative inquiry (Bruner, 1991; Seidman, 2013b). Participants often need time to reflect on their responses so that they are satisfied that their responses accurately communicate their intended meanings. These reflections often result in new insights and meanings that require additions, refinements, or changes to responses provided in the initial interview to convey the meaning of the participant’s narrative (Bruner, 1991; Seidman, 2013b). People’s lives are dynamic, so the interpretations and meanings they attach to their narratives may be constantly evolving. Only two participants participated in follow-up interviews, with the rest preferring phone or email follow-up. None of the participants made changes to their transcripts. Each participant was emailed a draft of the analysis of the data collected from all interviews (Chapter 5), and invited to request needed corrections to the parts of the analysis that reflected his or her inputs. Information that the researcher thought might identify a participant to other participants was redacted to try to preserve anonymity when sharing the analysis with individual participants.

The third source of data collection was the researcher’s reflective research journal. Journal entries included descriptions of the interviews and their context that provide nuances that aid understanding but are not evident in pure textual data provided by transcripts (Dávila, 2014; Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005; Kuntz, 2010). Responses and insights of the researcher were documented to allow for checking for and minimizing researcher bias in the interpretations of the narrations (Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005). Journal entries also listed initial coding categories and analyses generated during the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012b), and provided a space for jotting down participant responses to revisit in follow-up interviews for clarification or deeper
exploration (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012b). New questions, categories, or themes could also emerge as journal entries were reviewed. The journal also provided a space to document the researcher’s thought processes, analyses, and reflections.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study consisted of abstracting themes from the interview transcripts, beginning with basic codes and moving to higher levels of abstraction with each round of coding (Attride-Stirling, 2000; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012b; Seidman, 2013a). That is the basic process for qualitative data analysis. The process this study followed was that described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of first- and second-cycle coding, “jottings,” analytic memos, assertions, and propositions.

First-cycle coding involved applying labels to chunks of data. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) described codes as “labels that assign symbolic meaning to the descriptive or inferential data compiled during the study” (p. 71). Codes can be simple and straightforward descriptions or more complex, such as metaphors. They are condensed pieces of information that are categorized based on their relevance to each research question. That clustering aids in further analysis and easily locating the associated transcript text. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) described codes as being prompts for “deeper reflection on the data’s meaning” in the heuristic process of analysis (p. 73). It was important to provide clear definitions of each code so they could be applied consistently.

Second-cycle coding consisted of organizing the first cycle codes into a smaller number of higher-order themes by looking for patterns in the data. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) described second-cycle codes as meta, explanatory, or inferential codes that combine multiple first-cycle codes into themes. Coding is “a form of early and continuing analysis” (Miles,
Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 93). It inevitably results in redefining, refining, adding, or eliminating codes as new data are gathered. Throughout the coding process the researcher used a journal to write reflective and analytic notes to track the analytic process, reasoning, meanings, and inferences. Notes were jotted down on transcripts for easy reference. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) referred to this practice as “jottings” (p. 93) and analytic memoing (p. 95). Jottings were brief annotations on the transcribed data, while analytic memos were narratives “that document[ed] the researcher’s reflections and thinking processes about the data” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 95).

A final step in the data analysis was to create assertions that emerged from the previous steps (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). This step was the formal coherent report of the research findings. Assertions were declarative statements supported by the synthesis of the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, pp. 99-100). Assertions summarized and synthesized the large amount of data gathered during the study, and can be thought of as bullet points of the important themes that emerged that the researcher can report with confidence.

When analyzing this study’s data, themes that emerged were compared across participants. That analysis was intended to explore whether certain themes and identities co-occurred more than others. This step in the analysis was essential to addressing the research questions, which focused on the impact of intersectionality on the success of the participants’ experiences with influencing others when using relational activism. Intersectional analysis occurs where a person’s identities intersect with the phenomenon being studied. Because people have multiple identities, the way that the complexity of analyzing the impact of those identities is typically managed is to analyze one identity at a time rather than the full complement of a person’s identities at once (McCall, 2005). “What makes an analysis intersectional… is its
adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power,” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 785) framing categories as overlapping, fluid, and constantly being recreated by power dynamics (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). The researcher approached the analysis with an intersectional way of thinking and recognized that some themes and categories that emerged had blurred lines and significant overlap.

**Data Storage**

Interview transcripts were stored and coded using a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program. The data were password protected, and the researcher is the only person who has direct access to it. The principal investigator has access to the data upon request. Hard copies of data, such as journal entries, are stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home and will be destroyed after the study is completed, in accordance with Northeastern University IRB policies. Hard copies of audio recordings were deleted after transcription due to storage limits available to the researcher.

**Ethical Considerations**

Every part of this research involved an ethical decision, which was continual throughout the study; the highest degree of ethics was maintained throughout the entire research study (Kuntz, 2010; Shaw, 2008).

Precautions were taken for the protection of participants, such as asking them to select pseudonyms. Because intersectionality was integral to this study, the details of a participant’s identity and life experiences were important. Particularity was an essential part of both narrative inquiry (Bruner, 1991; Chase, 2011; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) and intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999; Dàvila, 2014; Malhorta & Pérez, 2005); therefore, choices
were made in favor of maintaining participant anonymity and reporting the information as authentically as possible within an ethical position.

Another ethical concern involves the researcher’s positioning in relation to the participants and how that can affect the flow and authenticity of the interviews (Briscoe, 2005; Takacs, 2002). That can include differences in privilege and perceived power between the researcher and the participants that could interfere with gathering useful and authentic data. Taking steps to put participants at ease helped create an environment conducive to authentic dialogue (Rubin & Rubin, 2012a). Member checking allowed for changes to be made by each participant after they reviewed the transcript and analysis of their interview.

Ethical considerations also extend beyond the completion of the study, particularly for critical-ideological research. Because critical-ideological research is intended to critique social injustice and promote change, especially by motivating oppressed groups to advocate for themselves, sharing the research in written language and in forums that are accessible to the oppressed group is an integral part of the ethics of the research. The research findings will be shared with other stakeholders in language and in forums that are easily digestible to them (Chase, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005; Sallee, 2012). Sharing critical research beyond the walls of academia with the public and various stakeholders is an important ethical decision to promote social justice change.

**Trustworthiness**

Attention to rigor and quality were maintained throughout the study to achieve trustworthiness, allowing the reader to have confidence in the quality of the research and trust its results and potential applications. Commonly accepted criteria for assessing the trustworthiness
of qualitative research are credibility/authenticity, transferability, dependability/auditability, and confirmability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005; Fassinger, 2005).

Creditability/authenticity of the study was established by using respected research methodologies. Transferability refers to the degree to which the researcher’s conclusions can be applied to similarly-situated people (Morrow, 2005). To provide sufficient information for the reader to make that determination, detailed information about the procedures of the study was provided, as well as rich context about the interview sites and thick description about and from the participants. Auditability refers to creating an audit trail tracing the research project from start to completion (Fassinger, 2005; Morrow, 2005). The trail creates transparency, to engender trustworthiness in the study. Member checking aided in establishing confirmability, which refers to ensuring that analysis and results flow from the participant data, not researcher bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Additional criteria of consequential validity and/or transgressive validity were included for assessing the trustworthiness of critical-ideological research (Morrow, 2005). Consequential validity refers a research study’s ability to create social change, while transgressive validity refers to the study’s impact on changes in thinking or sparking dialogues about change (Morrow, 2005). A goal of this study was to spark dialogue that will in turn eventually be instrumental in creating change. Relevance was also used as a criterion for assessing quality and rigor of narrative inquiry research that advocates for social or policy change (Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005).

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between intersecting identities and prison reform activists’ abilities to influence others through relational activism. The study
used a narrative inquiry approach within a critical research paradigm and applied intersectional analysis to the data. A screening survey was administered to potential participants to identify a purposive sample. Each participant had one in-depth interview and at least one follow-up contact. Journaling was used throughout the study for reflection and analysis. Analysis of the interview data involved recursive coding, journaling, memoing, and intersectional analysis. The following chapter presents the finding of the study.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

Incarceration rates remain extraordinarily high in the United States compared with most other nations (The Sentencing Project, 2017b). Although the steep rises that characterized the four-decade period known as mass incarceration no longer exist, incarceration rates have lingered near their historic highs with only small decreases, compared to the large increases during the period of mass incarceration (The Sentencing Project, 2017b). Some groups in the present day continue to be incarcerated at rates that are disproportionately high compared with their representation in the total population of the United States (Rampey et al., 2016; The Sentencing Project, 2017a; Wagner & Rabuy, 2015). This phenomenon is referred to as over-representation. People with mental illness is one group that is over-represented in the United States penal system (Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; LeCompte, 2015).

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the experiences of criminal justice activists who advocate for reform in how the United States criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness. Specifically, this study investigated how identity and relationships factor into their advocacy efforts. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do connections built between activists and their audiences influence their audiences’ receptiveness to prison reform for people with mental illness?
2. How do identities prison reform activists share with their audiences mediate their ability to build connections with their audiences?
3. Where do prison reform activists fall on the prison reform continuum regarding people with mental illness?
In-depth interviews were conducted with each participant in which they shared their backgrounds, views on mental health and incarceration, and form(s) their advocacy took. Follow-up was conducted in person, via brief phone calls, or through emails after sharing each participant’s complete interview transcript with him or her.

**Participants**

The purposive sampling strategy used resulted in a demographically-diverse participant group that shared a common belief that criminal justice reform is needed for people with mental illness. The sample was diverse primarily across race and gender, and socioeconomic class to a lesser degree. The distribution of participants’ race and gender separately and in combination is represented by the three charts below (Figure 3).

![Race Distribution](image1)

**Figure 3.** Distribution of race, gender, and race-gender combinations among participants (n = 9).

The table below (Figure 4) summarizes the participant sample in the four demographic areas that were targeted for participant diversity (race, gender, educational attainment level, socioeconomic class), as well as additional columns for employment sector and age bracket. Nine eligible participants were included in the study. Most of the participants work or worked in the field of education, including teachers, administrators, and school counselors. One participant
in the education sector is a former attorney, and another is retired. One of the school counselors is also a minister. Another participant has a paralegal degree and worked in logistics for several years, but was unemployed at the time of data collection. Another participant has a phlebotomist certification and worked in logistics as a civilian on an army base. One participant is self-employed in her own real estate business. Participant ages ranged from mid-thirties to late seventies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Current SES</th>
<th>Employment Sector</th>
<th>Age Bracket</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Two master’s degrees</td>
<td>Low to Middle</td>
<td>Education; Ministry</td>
<td>50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annette</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Middle to Upper</td>
<td>Real Estate</td>
<td>40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Low to Middle</td>
<td>Education / Mental Health</td>
<td>30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>J.D. and master’s degree</td>
<td>Middle to Upper</td>
<td>Education; Law</td>
<td>50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Middle to Upper</td>
<td>Education (retired)</td>
<td>70s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Middle to Upper</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>60s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malik</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Middle to Upper</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Associate’s degree plus one year</td>
<td>Low to Middle</td>
<td>Law; Logistics (unemployed)</td>
<td>30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philomena</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G.E.D. and medical credential</td>
<td>Low to Middle</td>
<td>Medical; Logistics (retired)</td>
<td>70s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.* Demographic Summary of Participant Sample.

**Themes**

Qualitative research allows for a deep exploration of the perspectives and experiences of the participants. The generous sharing of the participants provided valuable insights into issues
that affect people on a personal level. Several important themes emerged from the participants’ interviews. Each theme will be presented and discussed in relation to the research questions. The themes are listed in the table below (Figure 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Participants’ identities, including their families of origin, their relative privilege, their family histories or other relevant histories, and the struggles they did or did not experience had an impact on their views of and motivations to be involved in criminal justice reform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectional Awareness</td>
<td>Awareness of the struggles of various identities informed participants’ understandings of current incarceration patterns and participants’ support of reform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridging</td>
<td>Activism took the form of bridging: participants used empathy and intersectional awareness in conversations to build understanding of or between dissimilar others in order to promote social justice and change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Awareness</td>
<td>Participants articulated the need for education about mental illness: raising awareness about its prevalence, the human struggles associated with it that often result in arrest and incarceration, and the need for treatment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Activist efforts that focus on dispersing justice equitably for people with mental illness must include treatment and follow-up, include all stakeholders in developing policies and laws, and be transparent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Participants’ beliefs were grounded in a personal code of ethics or spirituality that motivated them to advocate for social justice for people with mental illness and other marginalized and disenfranchised people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harms of the Criminal Justice System</td>
<td>Participants had differing degrees of awareness of the harms of the criminal justice system for people with mental illness and others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5.* Summary of themes that emerged from participant interviews.

Although the focus of this research was to explore the experiences of activists who advocate for reform in how the criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness, participants also frequently mentioned the over-representation of Black men in carceral facilities. Each participant possessed an intersectional awareness of the struggles of people with various identities, including Black people and people with mental illness. The participant responses
about Black oppression were so prevalent that it would be remiss to exclude them. They are an integral part of the intersectional awareness that was apparent in all the interviews. They will be discussed in the section titled Related Findings.

**Theme 1: Identity - Participants’ identities, including their families of origin, their relative privilege, their family histories or other relevant histories, and the struggles they did or did not experience had an impact on their views of and motivations to be involved in criminal justice reform.**

Several participants identified as having experienced exceptional struggle personally, or as having come from a family history of exceptional struggle. Other participants witnessed the struggles of other people, which triggered the empathic responses that motivated them to become involved in criminal justice reform. Most participants, even those who described their identities as the most privileged or the most oppressed, were able to identify facets of their identity that both privileged and oppressed them, and see how they connected to their current activism.

Darius’ understanding of his intersecting identities centered mostly on race and the multitude of other marginalized identities that flow from race, such as poverty. Darius’ identity as a school counselor who has experienced many of the hardships of the students he serves informs his understanding of the complexities of the relationship between mental illness and incarceration. He exhibited awareness of social structures, such as zero-tolerance discipline policies in schools, that reinforce the connection between mental illness and incarceration, and he indicated a need to change those social structures.

I saw a lot of mental health issues that went undiagnosed, or noticed and [people would say] oh, he just crazy or he just such-and-such. Now that I’m in a [mental health] position, I think, wow, he could have been helped or she could have been helped, but they
ended up in jail because they did stuff. You mix that with the drugs and the drugs came and just kind of wiped through.

Although Greg described himself as having a privileged identity as a White male born into a family that was financially comfortable, he empathized with the struggles of others. In his former career as an attorney, he chose to work in a court diversion program for people with substance abuse struggles. He shared that he likes getting to know and understand different kinds of people and find ways to help others. He stated, “I appreciate more the opportunities I have to connect with other people and see areas of need and ways that I can help others. I think maybe what’s been, I don’t know, I keep thinking maybe the word evolve.”

Karen experienced a harsh upbringing. Her parents actively undermined her education and she was abused as a child. Her brother became involved in the illegal drug trade and took his own life when his children were young. Karen stated that she empathizes with her students who struggle with mental health issues and advocates for those who experience unhealthy home lives. She identifies with them and is motivated to help them avoid hardships similar to those she bore growing up.

I had to work harder. All through the time that I was in school I was not allowed to take a book home… So I would do all my homework on the bus and a friend would take my books home, and if I didn’t finish, I had to do it the next morning on the bus. I was physically and mentally abused as a child. My dad would beat us. He beat my brother until he was blind in one eye… So when these kids come to me and they’re physically abused and they’re mentally abused, oh god, I know where they’ve been. My brother committed suicide.
Karen indicated that her background probably makes her more inclined to try to figure out why a person behaved in a negative way and how to help, rather than judge and seek punitive responses, and to step in on behalf of students when she thinks punishment is not the right response to their behavior.

Malik stated that while he has empathy for people with mental illness who commit crimes, Black and White people with mental illness who commit crimes are not treated the same. He shared that he would like to see them treated more equitably for the same actions. Much of his intersectional awareness came from lived experience as a Black man and from knowing of the experiences of other Black men. He described watching an episode of the television show *The View* in which D. L. Hughley, a public personality who is African-American, was promoting his book *How Not to Get Shot by a Cop*:

[H]e’s passionate about it... He has a son with special needs. He said what if that’s a child with special needs and he doesn’t understand and the cops, they don’t know that the kid has special needs when they have that initial contact, or mental health issues, and the kid can’t understand and the kid does something that he’s not aware that he’s doing because of his condition and then he’s shot and killed.

As the parent of an autistic child, the mother of a daughter who died in a boating accident at age ten, and the sister of a brother who has struggled with alcoholism, Annette tapped into those identities to make connections and understand the struggles of others. She is a tireless advocate for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Annette stated that she worries about her autistic son encountering a police officer, fearing a police officer may misread her son’s reaction to a traffic stop, for example, and arrest him. She stated, “I’ve taught my boys that I don’t care if a cop tells you to do the hokey-pokey, you do the hokey-pokey. I can always fix it later. I can’t
fix it if you’re not breathing.” Annette’s identity as a parent of a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder, which is a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), is likely a factor in why she stated that the criminal justice system needs to be overhauled, particularly in terms of its response to people with mental disabilities and mental illnesses.

John stated that he has always been motivated by wanting to help people and to be instrumental in creating positive social change. To achieve those goals, he was originally going to be an Episcopal priest, but changed course and decided teaching would be the best avenue to pursue to be a change agent “because it’s always been about dealing with people, helping myself and other people grow.” He shared a story about how, as a young middle school English teacher, he convinced his principal to not send a group of students to the district’s alternative school. Instead, John volunteered to teach the students, stating that they acted out because their needs were not being met. By acting as an interventionist and attempting to figure out how to meet their needs, John said he hoped to avert them from possible future incarcerations.

Philomena grew up poor. Her father and maternal grandparents were Italian immigrants, and her parents’ first language was Italian. Her parents suffered a lot of discrimination and ridicule as foreigners, especially when they spoke their native Italian. Those experiences of seeing her parents victimized by discrimination informed her views of criminal and social justice. She also had two close friends in school who were Black, and she had a difficult time understanding and accepting the racial discrimination that was common when she was a child growing up in the 1940s and 1950s before the Civil Rights Movement. She stated, “I just think all should be treated fairly. You can’t judge them because of color or race. I just feel that you judge people by the way they act.” Philomena said she understands how struggle can make it
very difficult for some people to be successful in United States society, especially when there are social forces selectively impeding the success of some groups, as in the case of Black people, immigrants, and people with mental illness. She stated that poverty plays a large role in the lopsided dissemination of justice and advocates for changes that would eliminate roadblocks caused by poverty.

Natalie’s personal history of mental illness, as well as the prevalence of drug overdose deaths among her peers, has a strong impact on her motivation to be involved in criminal justice reform. She does not think that punishment is an effective way to treat substance abuse or mental illness, and that often the current punitive approaches can end in tragedy. Her identity as a member of a generation she described as being decimated by drug addiction is a motivating factor in her criminal justice advocacy. She stated that her own mental health struggles and traumatizing contacts with law enforcement motivate her to be involved in supporting change for how the criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness. She articulated, “We don’t want to do the things that we do. We’re embarrassed, it’s shameful, and we’re already feeling uncomfortable. We’re already not feeling well internally, so it doesn’t make sense to send somebody through the criminal system.”

The part of Ann’s identity that drives her to advocate for social justice is her innate desire to see all people treated fairly. “I describe myself first as a fair person. I try to look at all angles of a situation.” Ann wants to see people treated as people first without regard to factors such as race or ethnicity, ability or disability:

One of the most important things to me today is that people are treated fairly and that justice prevails. I like to see people treated equally, regardless of their background, their
race, their ethnicity, their religious background; just everyone is looked at as a person first, and then we can deal with other [issues].

**Theme 2: Intersectional Awareness - Awareness of the struggles of various identities informed participants’ understandings of current incarceration patterns and their support of reform.**

Participants recognized the role of privilege in incarceration patterns in the United States. Whether they identified as being privileged or whether they identified as being marginalized, they had developed an intersectional awareness that allowed them to understand how privilege factors into the undeniable numbers that reflect the over-representation of marginalized and oppressed identities in the criminal justice system. That intersectional awareness fueled their motivation to support change that would disperse justice more equitably. Additionally, participants identified both privileged and marginalized parts of their own identities. At the same time, personal privilege or marginalization appeared to limit or expand their capacity for intersectional awareness.

Darius exhibited an understanding of how the complexities of circumstances and identity impact incarceration trends. Acknowledging the role of poverty in incarceration, he described the impact of a plant closure in the town where he grew up. “That plant closed down, so now you got a bunch of people with no jobs. Now you got real poverty. You got real depression. You got real just anger issues.” He also acknowledged other identity factors in his community that aligned with high incarceration rates. He described how selling drugs is a part of the economy in many poor neighborhoods that have few legitimate means of eking out a livelihood. With that comes the associated substance abuse and jail time that further limit life opportunities.
Another factor of poverty that he described was the lack of access to mental health services in order to avoid police contact and the cycle of repeat incarcerations.

In both his previous career as an attorney and his current career as a middle school teacher, Greg has been acutely aware of how a person’s identities, privileges, and hardships impact their life choices and limits. To illustrate, he described one of his former eighth grade students. After school, the student had to take care of her niece while her sister and mother worked, so the student had very little time to complete homework. She was also exhausted. Greg said he understood why she did not complete her homework and was often difficult to deal with, given her responsibilities at home. “She needed attention. She needed somebody to give her that kind of time.” Based on his experience in the legal field, he indicated that a student in her situation is at risk for not graduating, which in turn puts her at higher risk for incarceration.

Karen was very passionate about discipline of her students. She stated that her school is often too harsh in the discipline it doles out without deeply considering the whole child. She does not believe that punishment should be the first response because many of her students are dealing with diagnosed and undiagnosed mental illness and dysfunctional family dynamics. When speaking of her students who have gotten in trouble in school or even involved with the courts, she said, “You have to take a look at where they come from. If that’s something that’s the norm for them [unhealthy family dynamics, drug use, petty crime], they don’t know any different.” Karen’s appreciation of her students’ identities, and the identities of others, informed her views on criminal justice. She stated that even for people with mental illness who commit serious crimes, including murder, that there should be better options for addressing the behavior.

As a Black man in the South, Malik was able to translate his intersectional struggles into understanding the struggles of people with mental illness who become incarcerated: “I think
sometimes when folks have a mental illness, they don’t understand, sometimes. They don’t understand the gravity of their decisions.”

Annette has had her own struggles and family tragedies, but she recognized that her identity affords her more protection from certain harms than people with other identities:

One of the things that I’ve noticed recently, especially with everything going on with Black Lives Matter and things like that, I won the genetic lottery as a blond White female. While I have disadvantages being female, there are other advantages that I have as well.

Annette also described the experiences of friends who are dealing with mental illness and how the identity of mental illness negatively affected their experiences with the criminal justice system.

John indicated that he is a huge believer in Glasser’s choice theory, so his intersectional awareness is colored by the lens of choice theory. Although he acknowledged intersecting identity factors that impede a person’s life experiences, he viewed all behaviors as choices, even those that are strongly influenced by a person’s oppressed circumstances. John made several statements that acknowledged the marginalization and difficult life circumstances of some people, but qualified each statement by describing any resultant negative behaviors as choices, regardless of the difficult situation a person was in: “Because people who are the, quote, lowest socially acceptable rungs of society usually are involved by choice in criminal activity because they’re frustrated, or are railroaded because of situations they’re in.” In that statement, he acknowledges that people can find themselves in very dire circumstances, but the statement taken as a whole shows that John does not fully appreciates the degree to which such dire life circumstances can impact a life, and even alludes to an expectation that the most disadvantaged
people will commit crimes by choice. That view of seeing all behaviors as fully a product of one’s choice is in stark contrast to the views of Darius and Malik, who are Black men who emphasize the role of historic oppression and trauma. This finding will be discussed in more detail in the section titled Related Findings.

Philomena described unfairness of any kind as unacceptable. She spoke of how “the poor and the Black get incarcerated for minor things compared to the White and wealthy. It just seems so obvious to me and that upsets me.” She also indicated that “there should be some sort of justice system for the poor that can’t afford to hire an attorney or bail” and that a person’s mental health status, or any circumstances beyond the person’s control, should be a consideration in sentencing.

Much of Natalie’s intersectional awareness came from personal experience with the mental health and criminal justice systems. Having been treated badly by the criminal justice system when she was not able to access mental health treatment, or when her mental illness worsened periodically, she had numerous harrowing stories that she shared. Although drug or alcohol abuse is not one of the issues she struggles with, she also shared the struggles many people in her social circle have had with drugs and alcohol. She described her generation as being killed off by drugs, and claimed that there is an urgent need to treat people struggling with addiction, not incarcerate them. She stated, “Four of five people in my life in 2015 lost their life to drugs, heroin and fentanyl. Good people.” Additionally, as a transplant from the Northeast to the Southeast, she described the culture shock she experienced, stating that Jim Crow attitudes are still quite prevalent in the South, which is evident in incarceration patterns by race.

As a school counselor, Ann’s work with students places her in a position in which she is aware of poverty, family dynamics, mental health struggles, learning difficulties, abuse, racial
bias, and other circumstances of her students that are associated with increased possibility of incarceration. She described her role as a school counselor as being an interventionist, helping students navigate all those challenges to divert them from the school-to-prison pipeline: “In my capacity here, it’s more of an intervention type thing, to just have them see if you continue down this path, you could get into some legal issues, and then that can lead to more serious problems.”

Theme 3: Bridging - Activism took the form of bridging: participants used empathy and intersectional awareness in conversations to build understanding of or between dissimilar others in order to promote social justice and change.

This theme addressed the two research questions which explored relational activism. Information participants provided shed light on with whom, or with which identities, participants built relationships more easily, and if that had any bearing on their ability to influence those people about their criminal justice reform messages.

The preferred type of activism for participants was one-on-one conversations with other people. Participants expressed that influencing others was more effective in the personal dynamic of individual conversations than organized action, such as protests. Participants viewed education as an integral part of activism: educating others about the issues is necessary so they understand why change is needed. Interestingly, some participants stated that they were more likely to have those conversations with others with whom they shared identities, while others were more likely to have those conversations with people whose identities they did not share.

Darius, Karen, and Malik each indicated that they are more likely to have conversations with, or be more successful influencing, people whose identities are different than theirs when advocating for criminal justice and mental health reform. For example, Karen, a White special education teacher, stated that she is more successful when approaching male colleagues and
administrators than female colleagues when advocating for her students. She described a time many years ago when a girl student in her elementary special education class was playing with a dirty bra. She brought the bra to her principal and explained what was going on in her classroom:

That helped him actually understand this kid better. It ended up that her mama passed away… From that situation in itself [the girl playing with her mother’s bra], they got the social worker to go out to the house, and the house didn’t have any windows, and they needed so much.

Malik, a Black high school administrator, described seizing opportunities to talk about the changes needed in the criminal justice system. He indicated that he has frequent conversations with school resource officers, other law enforcement personnel, and White school administrators to present them with another perspective and build understanding of the struggles of people who are most often caught in the penal system. He has found that single conversations do not make a big impact on changing their understanding, but he keeps going back to them to have more conversations, chipping away at their resistance a little at a time. He stated, “Part of being able to communicate to people in a way that they want to hear it is you have to build relationships.” Through sustained effort and open dialogue, he has been able to influence others who have different identities than him to at least be able to acknowledge and appreciate the legitimacy of a perspective that differs from theirs.

Darius, a Black high school counselor, indicated that he has a very direct way of approaching people in conversation about what he perceives as injustice, and he has found it to be effective. He expressed that he prefers direct and honest conversation to dancing around a sensitive subject, which can make change take longer. According to the numerous stories he
shared, he is more likely to approach people with whom he does not share identities. For example, he shared a story of approaching a White female teacher on behalf of a student whom she sent to the principal for wearing a Tupac Shakur t-shirt to school. He explained to her that Tupac’s ideas and poetry were well-respected and taught in Ivy League schools. Further, he told her that the student’s time would be better spent in class instead of being sent to an administrator for a shirt that had nothing inappropriate for school depicted on it. Darius asked the teacher to come to him with questions she may have in the future related to Black culture or other cultures he may be more familiar with, and he would come to her with questions about White culture or other cultures she may be more familiar with, rather than either of them making potentially harmful assumptions. Darius said he and the teacher had a great relationship after that.

I just know how a lot of people think in the South, and I’ll get intentionally close to them, and I did that this year with a teacher… I said so when you are judging, here’s the thing, I’m sure there’s stuff that you know about that I probably have false notions about. I would hope that I can come and ask you about them, and I’m going to extend that olive branch so that if you have any questions about that you don’t know that I probably know about, instead of automatically thinking that this kid should be in trouble for a shirt, come talk to me about it.

For the three participants mentioned above, building relationships with dissimilar others to promote social justice came easily to them. Once those relationships were built, the participants indicated they were more successful in influencing those people to listen to their social justice concerns. Karen stated:
I shared the story [about the bra], gave him the bra, and he said he had a totally different picture of me after that. I said, “We have to share what has gone on in our classroom with you because you don’t know.”

Annette and Natalie, two participants who were passionate about the need for criminal justice reform, indicated they most often have conversations about the topic with people who are similar to themselves. Annette, a White real estate agent, indicated that she easily builds relationships with people who do not necessarily share her identities. However, when asked which people she has had more influence on regarding social justice issues, she stated, “Most of the people have been similar to myself.”

Natalie also indicated that she has been more effective with people with whom she shares identities. Natalie indicated that one-on-one conversations are the cornerstone of effective activism. She expressed that they are more targeted and fine-tuned to hit their mark, as opposed to mass efforts, such as protests, in which “you sort of throw your message out there hoping it sticks to something.” She indicated that communication is key to criminal justice activism, and knowing your audience is key to communicating effectively so that the audience is persuaded by the message:

When you’re one-on-one with somebody, especially somebody that you know fairly well or that’s just not a stranger, you know how to approach that particular person. It’s not such a generalized generic approach. I think that when you customize that, that conversation, it’s easier to reach somebody. I think they’re more likely to listen and actually hear you.

Natalie’s comments illustrate that in her view, relationships are the context in which activism is most effective. Natalie stated that she usually carries out activism in the context of existing
relationships, but has occasionally sought to build relationships to promote her social justice message.

Participants described relationship-building as integral to activism. Some participants built relationships with dissimilar others to promote change, while others were more effective within existing relationships.

**Theme 4: Mental Health Awareness** - Participants articulated the need for education about mental illness: raising awareness about its prevalence, the human struggles associated with it that often result in arrest and incarceration, and the need for treatment.

The need for increased mental health awareness, framed as education, was a recurring theme that arose from the participants. Participants said that young people in school need to be educated about mental illness and how to find help; educators need to be educated to recognize and support students struggling with mental illness; and police officers need to be educated to field first responder calls to people with mental illness who are in crisis more humanely and appropriately. Additionally, participants asserted that a more aware and better-educated public would reduce stigma associated with mental illness to pave the way for understanding it as a human struggle worthy of empathy and support. Participants also talked about the importance of historical trauma and oppression in present-day mental health issues.

Natalie spoke of how her multiple mental illnesses create a continuous cycle of frustration. Difficulty with holding a job creates barriers to mental health care when she loses employer-sponsored health insurance and access to mental health treatment through the insurance. Not having access to treatment increases the likelihood of experiencing a mental health crisis. Natalie stated that any person functioning in the role of a first responder to a person experiencing a mental health crisis, such as a police officer, should be well-trained in how
to respond appropriately. She explained that properly-trained first responders to people experiencing transient mental health crises would result in fewer people cycling through prisons and jails for mental health reasons that require treatment, not punishment:

Well, like my situation, with it being difficult for me to access medication, I can’t hold onto a job, because I don’t have health insurance. There’s a lot of people in that situation where mental health affects their ability to hold employment. They can’t get medication that keeps them stable and allows them to function in society. Rather than the family or a friend sending them to mental health resources [when experiencing a mental health crisis], they call the cops because there’s no education there… We need people who are the initial contact in law enforcement, like the police officers that do patrol… to be educated to be able to make a decision right then and there, like are we going to have this person evaluated at the local hospital before we haul them off to jail? They need to be able to make good judgment calls as to where to send people to begin with.

Natalie said that criminal records resulting from arrests for mental health crises that should have been treated as health care emergencies can contribute to the cycle of joblessness and loss of health care benefits, because an arrest record makes it more difficult to get hired.

Karen expressed that there is a need for a better-informed criminal justice process that considers the human conditions leading to an arrest of a person with mental illness. In Karen’s view, incarceration is not appropriate as a first option for people with mental illness, even those
who have committed horrible crimes. She advocated for employing an intermediate step, “a stepping stone” such as diagnosis and therapy, before resorting to incarceration.

Natalie stated that to create transformative change requires educating children when they are young, similar to how they receive drug education and sex education in elementary and middle school:

I think that doing real life education, introducing the concepts of mental health and that awareness, then you would have a generation that grows up with understanding it and not seeing it as a stigma, and a generation that can support each other.

Darius agreed that schools are a good place to build mental health awareness. He stated that a key to changing the criminal justice system for people with mental illness is early education. He indicated that we need to “combat it early on” in schools through better educator awareness and training to identify mental illness and provide early intervention to avoid the school-to-prison pipeline, which is a common outcome for students with mental health issues. He shared:

I dealt with thirty kids who were suicidal this year… We don’t push mental health training enough and we don’t take it seriously enough. A lot of our teachers do know mental health, you know. So why don’t we take this seriously? Depression is bad. Anxiety is bad. So why are we not taking it seriously? And why are we not helping our babies?

Several participants articulated the need to spread public awareness of the day-to-day struggles of people with mental illness in order for others to appreciate the inappropriateness of responding with incarceration. For example, Greg emphasized a need to understand why a person behaves in a way that results in arrest in order to develop appropriate ways to meet the
person’s needs. “You know, you got a guy with a record a mile long with nonviolent offenses, they don’t just shoplift because they want to steal stuff. They’re trying to accomplish some other objective.” Ann had an understanding of the interwoven factors affecting people with mental illness and their contact with the criminal justice system. She stated several times that people who understand those things need to spread an informed awareness of mental illness. She indicated that making people aware of those challenges is needed to develop appropriate solutions to support people with mental illness, rather than making their circumstances worse by layering unsurmountable challenges on them.

It’s important for us to raise awareness about that. So that’s just one level… when you look at the topic of mental illness. It’s a big umbrella, it’s a big issue. Then you put on top of that a person incarcerated, that just adds another tier to the difficulty as to how a person [copes]. Within the criminal justice system, I’m sure that there are people who probably may not be getting proper medication or treatment or being properly diagnosed. So they’re just kind of out there on the fringes kind of making do on their own. Then when those people are released, of course they’re in society, then you have homelessness, poverty is of course an over-arching umbrella.

Darius provided powerful insights into the complex relationship between mental illness and incarceration of Black men. He spoke of how social abuse and deprivation have contributed to the prevalence of trauma among Black men, which he stated goes mostly undiagnosed. The results can significantly limit life opportunities or even be fatal when the men eventually become involved in the penal system. He spoke of how some of his cousins had undiagnosed mental illness that contributed to their incarcerations, expressing, “They cannot find a job because they have a criminal background. What do you expect them to do?” Like Darius, Malik talked about
the trauma of Black people and how that factors into higher incarceration rates, but he spoke more in terms of historical trauma. He explained how four hundred years of social abuse traumatized an entire people who cannot just “get over it” and move on, about how a long history of social abuse and deprivation has contributed to present-day struggles for Black people. Both participants indicated that more awareness of the connections among Black oppression, mental illness, and incarceration is needed.

Participants articulated the need for multi-pronged education to build awareness of the need for change in how the criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness. In keeping with the relational strategies they preferred, a strong theme among several participants was the need to personalize the advocacy message by humanizing, rather than stigmatizing, people with mental illness and their struggles in order to build empathic understanding as a basis for supporting change.

**Theme 5: Change - Activist efforts that focus on dispersing justice equitably for people with mental illness must include treatment and follow-up, include all stakeholders in developing policies and laws, and be transparent.**

Participants expressed a strong desire for the criminal justice system to operate more fairly. They realized that healthy and appropriate policy change for people with mental illness will require input from all parties affected by the policies. Some stressed the need for transparency, which overlaps with Theme 4’s spreading of awareness to the public. Participants also stressed the need for consistent, readily-available treatment and follow-up for people with mental illness to circumvent incarceration, regardless of whether they have the means to pay for health insurance.
As Natalie described earlier in this chapter, access to health care is important for maintaining stability for many people with mental illness and for minimizing the risk that they will have a crisis that precipitates a first-responder call to the police. However, many of those same people have mental illness severe enough to interfere with staying employed in order to keep their health benefits.

Philomena stated that those in that situation should have access to health care, regardless of their ability to pay. She stated that people with mental illness should have the same access to health care as people with other health conditions and disabilities. If other debilitating conditions qualify a person for services such as Medicaid, she expressed that people with debilitating mental illness should have the same access if they cannot afford health insurance, or if their condition is too debilitating to allow them to maintain consistent employment to pay for health insurance to access treatment. She stated, “I think they’re entitled to receive health insurance.”

For Greg, the biggest criminal justice change that needs to be made is sharply focusing on why people end up in the penal system, then addressing those human needs, providing support, therapy, rehabilitation, and whatever else is needed. For people with mental illness, the focus should be on therapy. He stated:

I think it still goes back to what’s the real problem?... Why did they get arrested? Why are they in that situation in the first place?… [P]eople who have mental illness, whether it’s been diagnosed, whether it’s been managed properly… They need education about how to cope with things, anger management, those kinds of things. I do believe that there are not that many really bad people... I think people want to do the right thing. They don’t want to be in trouble… Without addressing some of these other things like mental
illness or substance abuse, or addiction, I guess, then you’re not really going to rehabilitate that person.

Several participants expressed that involving all stakeholders in policy-making is necessary to achieving more just and humane treatment of people with mental illness. For those participants, including all stakeholders meant including people who have mental illness. They indicated that effective policies could not be made without input from the people most affected by them, those with mental illness. As Natalie explained:

You need to have mental health professionals, educators, people in the community who are consumers and providers. With all that input, you could come up with more appropriate structured sentencing that leans towards rehabilitation, avoiding recidivism, and not having people that don’t even have charges or convictions against them with mental illnesses just sitting in jail waiting two months or three months or six months for a court date.

Malik also expressed the need for more stakeholder involvement: “There’s going to have to be some conversation and communication. It needs to include all parties… Oftentimes… folks make laws and make decisions and they have no experience with what they’re making laws and making decisions for.”

Annette and Natalie shared that how the criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness is mostly invisible to the public. They indicated that without transparency, people with mental illness will continue to be abused and neglected in the criminal justice system.

Natalie described a harrowing experience in which her anxiety resulted in a three-day hospitalization after a traffic stop. When the police ran her information through their data base, they found there was a four-year-old bench warrant for her arrest for failing to appear to court for
an old traffic violation. A symptom of one of her diagnoses is difficulty with memory, so she did not remember the court date. Natalie was arrested for the failure-to-appear warrant upon release from the hospital. When she arrived at the jail directly from the hospital with all of her medications in their original prescription containers, she was denied being able to take them. She stated, “I was denied my mental health medication. I was assaulted by the sergeant, and I was denied a phone call for fourteen hours.” Her family did not know what happened to her or how to contact her. When she informed one of the corrections officers that seizure was a risk of missing doses or stopping one of her prescriptions suddenly, he told her to stay close to the ground to minimize injury if she seized on the concrete floor. When she continued to ask for her prescriptions to manage her rising anxiety, another corrections officer told her, “We don’t give those kind of medications. You’re just going to have to deal without. You’re in jail. You get what we decide to give you.”

Annette shared similar experiences of some of her friends. She had friends who struggled with mental illness and were arrested. They were denied their prescribed medications while in jail. Those who did not have current prescriptions and were prescribed medications after being in jail were not provided a sufficient supply to last them from their release date until they could see a doctor to ensure uninterrupted use of their prescribed medications. Because the medications kept them stable, when the medications ran out before they could get an appointment with a doctor, they were at higher risk for re-arrest.

The general public is not aware of the specifics of how people with mental illness are treated by the criminal justice system. Annette and Natalie expressed that transparency about incidents such as those described above is needed to motivate more people to advocate for change in how the criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness.
Theme 6: Ethics - Participants’ beliefs were grounded in a personal code of ethics or spirituality that motivated them to advocate for social justice for people with mental illness and other marginalized and disenfranchised people. Each participant described a moral or ethical compass that compelled her or him to advocate for social justice. For some, it was their spiritual foundation, for others it was a strong sense of fairness or some other innate ethical force that would not allow them to feel comfortable staying silent about a social injustice.

Several participants described their ethical beliefs as integral to their support of social justice. For example, in both his previous career as an attorney and his current career as a middle school social studies teacher, Greg was motivated by his sense of fairness and justice and natural inclination to want to make the world a better place for everyone. Those personal qualities seem to also be what led him to choose both careers in the first place.

[W]hat I feel very strongly about is making connections with other people, being involved, reaching out to other people. That’s one of the neat things about what I teach, the chance to look at other cultures… Being active and kind of challenging yourself to, I don’t know, we like to try to make things better around us, better community, better place.

Similarly, Malik described his personal beliefs as being guided by fairness: “That’s what we preach and try to communicate to our kids in schools; we try to communicate that to our teachers. Be fair.”

Philomena credited her family with providing a sound ethical foundation that informs her personal principles. “My parents were honest, hard-working people, and that’s what they expected from us.”
Natalie saw herself as being guided by a strong ethical core, and stated, “I think that I’m very ethical and I do hold myself to a high moral standard.” She stated that she has little tolerance for unethical practices, especially when they cause harm to vulnerable people. She described transparency as one of the highest levels of ethical practice. She advocated for more transparency in the criminal justice system so that the public is better informed about its flaws, especially those affecting the welfare of people with mental illness.

Ann stated that she has always had a desire to help others. That innate desire led her to become a middle school counselor and part-time pastor. She described her inner drive to help in the following words:

I knew that I wanted to be in a helping profession, that I was somehow going to be a person who tried to help and reach out to others, people who are disenfranchised and also the ones that maybe have to be displaced, or the outcasts living on the fringes of society.

Darius was motivated by empathy and a strong intrinsic desire to help others who have experienced great hardships. “I chose this field because I know that there’s people out there that just need to be understood, and I understand them. I get it, no judgment, I just want to help.”

Several participants cited their spiritual foundations as being integral to their social justice views. For example, every response John provided to a question circled back to Glasser and choice theory. Part of the reason was that John saw it as the secular counterpart to his Christian belief system:

In looking in the classroom and seeing these little kids, because remember I wanted to be a priest, I thought that’s a child of God and you will treat that child like a child of God. The Christian thing, love God, love your neighbors, love yourself. Well this [choice
theory] is how in secular language to love yourself and your neighbor as yourself. That to me is what it’s all about.

Philomena, Karen, and Annette also expressed strong spiritual beliefs that impacted their views, motivations, and involvement in social justice. This was evident not only in what they said, but also the frequency with which they included their spiritual views in their responses to the interview questions. Philomena stated simply, “God is important to me,” and her strong spiritual foundation has an influence on her views of the criminal justice system, providing the true north of her belief system, informing and guiding how she believes people should treat one another.

Karen expressed a great deal of empathy for her students and others who make poor decisions, especially if their decision-making is impaired due to mental illness. That way of being in the world is tied to her spiritual beliefs. She stated, “Probably the most important thing would be my faith and Randy [her husband].” She also described having an inner compass that takes into account what she believes to be fair consequences in the context of each individual student’s circumstances.

Reflecting on people who are struggling with mental illness, even violently mentally-ill people who engage in horrifically violent behavior, Annette makes sense of it in terms of her faith and is unable to completely malign the person. She stated, “When I sat my kids down and explained to them about their brother [with Autism Spectrum Disorder], I told them God wired his brain a little differently.” She applied that same explanation to people with mental illness who engage in crime: God wired them differently; therefore, even those who commit horrible crimes deserving punishment should also receive support and guidance.
In a sense, each of the participants described something bigger than themselves as compelling them to speak up for social justice. Even if it was simply their own innate sense of fairness and ethics that spoke to them, it was a voice they could not ignore. Their spiritual and ethical beliefs highlighted the humanity of all people, compelling them to seek humane solutions and consider the circumstances of people, not just their actions.

**Theme 7: Harms of the Criminal Justice System - Participants had differing degrees of awareness of the harms of the criminal justice system for people with mental illness and others.**

All participants were aware of some harms of incarceration. However, the level of their knowledge of the harms caused by the criminal justice system was affected by their contact with it, which in turn was affected by their identity. Those who had a mental illness or had a loved one who had a mental illness, and those who were non-White or who had worked in the criminal justice system, had more intimate knowledge either first-hand or vicariously through of the workings of the criminal justice system. Those with more intimate knowledge, either through their own incarceration or a loved one’s, or through employment in the criminal justice system, had a more in-depth awareness of the harms inflicted by the criminal justice system.

Karen viewed the school setting as part of the prison system when certain practices and policies were followed, such as zero-tolerance for various offenses, especially for students with mental illness who cannot manage their behavior as well as other students. She stated that inflexible school disciplinary policies that are exclusionary or overly-punitive are the earliest harms of the criminal justice system, priming students for incarceration, instead of addressing the root causes of the behaviors. She indicated that a fair justice system would take into account a person’s circumstances and the context in which they grow up and live. She commented that
without early intervention, those in the most dire circumstances move into adulthood without the tools to avoid the prison system. In her words, “They have to survive, so they resort to what we know are crimes, such as drugs or stealing. They resort to those to survive.”

Some participants described the inhumanity of incarceration as one of its major harms. They asserted that people need connection, and that incarceration deprives people of many human needs. Philomena described the whole experience of incarcerating a person as dehumanizing. It shows that society does not value that person as a human being, and it is not beneficial to the person or society when that person is eventually released. As she put it, “Being in a prison is like saying, ‘Hey, you know what? You’re not worth the time or the money or the food or anything.’”

John described how depriving people of being able to meet their needs is a great harm of incarceration. He perceived the major harm of incarceration to be that it severs the incarcerated person from social connection, which frustrates the human need for connection and belonging. He also stated that, as a coercive institution, the penal system was doomed to fail, because people do not respond well to coercion: “Anything that is coercive is destined to fail in terms of causing a change in behavior.”

Greg commented that incarcerating people makes them angrier. He indicated that he does not believe most people need to be incarcerated, but if they are, they should be doing something productive and rehabilitative. He stated, “Let’s help people get better.” In his view, continuing to operate the penal system in a way that makes inmates angrier is not helpful to them or to society when they are released.

Some participants described the interplay of various conditions that multiplied and entrenched the harms of the criminal justice system. For example, Darius expressed frustration
over the long-term consequences of incarceration. To him, it was bad enough that incarceration was not dispersed equitably, but the long-term consequences made it even worse. He grew up in an economically-depressed area where many of his cousins resorted to selling drugs to make money when the main employer of his little town shut down. He stated, “All my cousins that went to jail, they cannot find a job because they have a criminal background. What do you expect them to do?” He commented that some of his cousins and others he knew who went to jail were probably struggling with undiagnosed mental illness and needed help, so incarceration was not appropriate for them. Because they were incarcerated instead of receiving the help they needed, they are now coping with long-term disadvantages of a criminal record in addition to the mental illness that contributed to the incarceration.

Annette also described the multiplicative effect of various factors on people who are caught in the carceral cycle. She made an observation about why people from impoverished neighborhoods are incarcerated at higher rates. As other participants also noted, people in such circumstances are more likely to engage in some crimes to survive, so the crime rate for the neighborhood is increased. Annette explained the various factors are layered, resulting in lopsided dissemination of justice.

I think there’s several layers that go into it. One is the fact that if you’re in an impoverished area that has higher crime, you’re going to be pulled over more, you’re going to be detained more because you’re around more crime. When you’re around less crime, you’re not going to be surveilled as much. There is an automatic distrust with people that are different than you, and it doesn’t matter whether it’s mental illness or skin color or hair color. As soon as someone is different, unknown is always seen as scary. So there’s always that layer.
Natalie stated that the current punitive approach to people struggling with substance abuse actually hastens their deaths. She described instances of friends and acquaintances who got caught in the penal system without appropriate treatment, a situation that contributed to their deaths. She said substance abuse is being inappropriately treated as a crime rather than as the health issue that it is, which contributes to people cycling in and out of prison, limiting life opportunities, such as employment and higher education, more and more with each arrest. She went on to describe the impact of a prison record on employment long after a person has served their time for a crime. Often formerly-incarcerated people are limited to employment industries known for a prevalent illegal drug culture.

Once you have the felony charge, it is a black mark on you, period. You cannot escape it. You pay for your crime the rest of your life until the day you die. You served your time but you can’t even get a job flipping a burger. A lot of times you end up with jobs that are day jobs, construction work, where you’re exposed to a drug culture kind of like in restaurant work. You’re paid under the table, don’t know when work’s going to come in, don’t have a steady income, then you’re back to doing illegal activities to support yourself.

Summary of Themes

The preferred activist strategy among participants was one-on-one conversations. Understanding one’s own identity in terms of privilege and marginalization helped participants develop intersectional awareness of others. Intersectional awareness was essential to crafting an advocacy message to which others were receptive, and which was closely tied to empathy. Participants used intersectional awareness and empathy to influence others through the relational process of bridging. Bridging involves creating connections and understandings among
dissimilar others. Thus, building relationships with others was an integral part of the participants’ activism: they were more likely to be able to influence people with whom they had put effort into building relationships.

Participants’ depth of intersectional awareness was expanded or limited by their own identities and lived experiences. Those with a deeper appreciation of the effects of intersecting identities tended to lean toward prison abolitionist, rather than prison reformist, ideals.

Participants articulated core ethical and spiritual beliefs that compelled them toward social justice advocacy. Changes they advocated for people with mental illness included public education and awareness, appropriate training for first responders, and transparency to the public regarding how people with mental illness are treated in the criminal justice system. Participants exhibited understanding of some of the struggles associated with mental illness that frequently result in arrest and incarceration. They also expressed understanding the harms of the criminal justice to people with mental illness and advocated treatment in lieu of or in combination with incarceration.

**Intersectional Analysis**

This section presents an intersectional interpretation of how the research questions were addressed through the participants’ interviews. Some intersectional differences were observed, but not all were along the lines that were originally proposed by this study (race, gender, education attainment level, socioeconomic class). Instead, other identities emerged in the process of data collection that were primary in sorting intersectional differences related to the research questions.
**R1: How do connections built between activists and their audiences influence their audiences’ receptiveness to prison reform messages for people with mental disabilities?**

Participants tapped into their intersectional awareness in order to bridge understanding. When interacting with people with whom they had built relationships, they attempted to build understanding of others with different identities. People with whom they had connections were at least willing to listen to what the activists communicated about the need for prison reform, mental health reform, and reform in the way the criminal justice system responds to people who have mental illness. By understanding the identities of the people with whom they had built connections, activists had a better sense of how to present their advocacy messages on behalf of dissimilar others in ways that enhanced the understanding and empathy of the people with whom they had built connections. In this way, they were able to use intersectional awareness of dissimilar others to bridge understanding of a marginalized group by a different group. That new understanding was the foundation of the activists’ influence on the people with whom they had built connections. Some were more successful than others. Starting with a strong common identity enhanced most activists’ success in influencing others. Natalie summarized this phenomenon:

A lot of the people I’ve been successful with are from the area I grew up in because our whole generation is dying. When I bring up the criminal justice system, we all know somebody, at least one person a year probably, that has died from drugs… Most of the people I associate with tend to be open-minded because you’re attracted to people who have a lot of the same views that you do or the same kind of personality. It’s not been hard to be successful in changing the way people think because a lot of times it’s just something that hasn’t come across their radar before, that they’ve never thought of, and
it’s kind of one of those aha! I definitely get that… When you have those conversations one-on-one or with a small group, they have a personalized basis to go on and possibly talk to the next person. It didn’t just fly over their head.

To summarize, for most participants, having a personal connection or relationship with their audiences enhanced their audiences’ receptiveness to their prison reform messages.

**R2: How do identities prison reform activists share with their audiences mediate their ability to build connections with their audiences?**

Activists’ abilities to build relationships with their audiences depended as much on skill as on identity. In Darius’ case, he relied on interpersonal skills more than on communicating with people who shared his identities, because the most important topics he addressed were often with people who had identities that were different from his. He bridged understanding by naming “the elephant in the room” so that genuine dialogue could follow, unencumbered by awkwardly tiptoeing around it. Darius boldly confronted others whose identities and belief systems were different from his. His bold, direct approach was generally well-received by the people he confronted about what he perceived to be a social injustice and opened dialogues about how to work together to address social injustices. Karen also built relationships with people who were different from her. She stated that although she attempts to build relationships with many different people who do and do not share her identities, she found it easier to build relationships in which she was successfully persuasive with men. Malik also indicated that he works on building relationships with others who are different from himself, such as White school resource officers and other educators who have views that are different from his.

The other participants built relationships primarily with people whose identities were similar to their own. The identities that were the salient shared identities were unique to each
participant. For example, Natalie’s social circle included people who already have an advocacy mindset in terms of prison reform and mental health reform. That is the salient common identity she described. She claimed it is easy to build relationships on that common belief system. Other participants built relationships more easily based on other shared identities, such as gender, race, age, spiritual belief system, common background experiences, and so forth.

To summarize, most participants found it easier to build relationships with others who shared a common salient identity with them. However, some sought out building relationships with others whose identities were different from theirs when seeking to build connections for the purpose of social justice advocacy.

R3: Where do prison activists fall on the prison reform continuum regarding people with mental disabilities?

The definitions of prison abolition and prison reform are revisited here to orient the reader: *Prison abolition* is a way of alleviating social problems so that the need for prisons is drastically reduced, benefiting society, not just would-be inmates (Jackson & Meiners, 2010; Meiners, 2011). It addresses the conditions that increase a person’s likelihood of being incarcerated, such as mental illness, poor education, substance abuse, extreme poverty, parental incarceration, food deserts, unemployment, insufficient access to health care, and other contributing social conditions. It is proactive, rehabilitative, inclusive, and humane, and rejects the prison paradigm as reactive, punitive, exclusionary, and inhumane. Compared with prison abolition, *prison reform* works exclusively within the prison paradigm and language to improve it rather than to dismantle it through social restructuring (Jackson & Meiners, 2010). The differences between prison abolition and prison reform include the starting point of change, the degree of change advocated, and the perception of the legitimacy of the prison paradigm.
Envisioning prison reform as a continuum with the most abolitionist, or transformational, reforms on one end and the most reformist, or conservative, reforms on the other, all participants except John fell somewhere between the middle of the continuum and the abolition end of it. John was more moderate than reformist, but was the least abolitionist of all participants. All of the participants advocated for, at minimum, incarceration with mental health treatment for people with mental illness. However, some participants were solidly moderate, believing people with mental illness still need to be punished in the same way as everyone else while also receiving treatment, while other participants advocated for reforms more in line with prison abolition. The figure below is the interpretation of the approximate prison reform position of the participants.

Figure 6: Results of where participant prison activists fell on the prison reform continuum for people with mental disabilities (R3)

The abolitionists: Natalie, Karen, Annette, Greg, Darius. Participant activists who fell on the abolition end of prison reform for people with mental illness were those who had first-hand experience with mental illness, either personally or through a loved one, and those who had first-hand experience with incarceration as a result of their mental illness, or witnessed justice being dispensed along racial, disability, or poverty lines through close contact with the courts, either personally or vicariously. Those participants were Natalie, Karen, Annette, Greg, and Darius. It is doubtful that any of them would have identified as prison abolitionists if asked
directly. However, referring to the definitions provided for prison abolition and prison reform above, the responses they provided place them closer to prison abolitionist than reformist ideals.

The more intimate the participant’s knowledge of the criminal justice system, the more adamant she or he was about supporting abolitionist reforms. For example, Natalie, who had some very traumatizing encounters with law enforcement related to her mental illness, stated when asked what changes are needed in the current criminal justice system, “I think it should be obliterated.”

Greg, a former attorney who worked in a prison diversion program, stated that there are very few genuinely bad people who should be locked up. This aligns with the abolitionist concept of “the dangerous few,” which asserts that there are very few people whose behaviors are dangerous enough to warrant separation from society. Greg supported treatment, rehabilitation, and access to other resources to help people with limited access to those resources avoid incarceration. The position Greg described is what is known by activists as structural change, which is the cornerstone of prison abolition.

Annette stated that the entire criminal justice system needs to be overhauled, and that incarceration is inappropriate for people with mental illness. She indicated that it makes their conditions worse, especially given that if they were already receiving treatment prior to incarceration, the treatment is often suspended, at least temporarily. According to Annette, that pause in treatment combined with the stress of incarceration is detrimental to the well-being of people with mental illness and is not humane or even logical. Referring to the experience of someone she knew, she stated, “Why would you think an adult can be in a box for seven months and not see the sky? Are you crazy?”
Darius’ life experiences provided him with intimate exposure to the criminal justice system. He was raised in an economically-depressed community with high unemployment matched by high incarceration rates, which claimed several family members. He stated that people from extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods suffer more trauma than most, and that structural changes and mental health resources are more effective strategies than incarceration to address high crime rates in those areas. When talking about men he counseled in a prison, Darius shared the following thoughts about how social structures that leave people with few opportunities and options can change the trajectory of a life:

Looking at the talents that they possessed, and looking at the type of men they were. Caring men who could have been great fathers to their kids who are now being raised by a single mom, [men] who could have been a CEO of companies because they ran their drug trade so good, but that’s all they were told they could do. So if you had given them the tools they needed, then they would have been able to do that stuff. It’s difficult to run a successful drug business. You think about it. You have to do all the checks and balances, make sure you put people in place in the right areas, and you gotta watch your shoulder because you can’t trust anybody. You can get gunned down at any time. Can you imagine what that takes?

Having suffered abuse as a child and seeing how it damaged her siblings, Karen had an intimate understanding of how a person’s circumstances can influence their ability to function in socially-acceptable ways. She advocated for alternatives to punishment even for murder, believing some sort of intervention should be provided before punishment, what she referred to as a “stepping stone.”
**The moderates: Philomena, Ann, Malik.** Philomena was about halfway between moderate and abolitionist. Her responses indicated that in all cases a person’s mental health and life circumstances should be taken into consideration when deciding whether incarceration is appropriate. One of her proposed alternatives to incarceration was mental health hospitalization, which many abolitionists view as medical incarceration. Another alternative she proposed was a kind of probation in which the person receives mental health treatment with strict monitoring and follow-up to ensure the person is in compliance with treatment.

Although Ann had a family member who was navigating the aftermath of incarceration, she appeared to support more moderate reforms. She did not say she was against incarcerating people with mental illness who committed crimes. However, she repeatedly stated that there needs to be more awareness about mental illness so that mental health issues can be addressed before they reach a point where incarceration is possible or likely. In other words, her position is one of early intervention to divert people with mental illness from incarceration, but she did not state that treatment should be used in lieu of incarceration for any crime.

Malik was firmly middle of the road. Although he recognized that a mental illness can make it difficult for people to understand the gravity of their actions or to make good choices, he stated that they should receive rehabilitation and treatment, but also receive the same punishment as any other person who breaks the law.

There was no common identity or intersecting identities that seemed to predispose the three moderate reformists to their positions. They were different genders, races, and age brackets.

**The reformist: John.** John continued to promote choice theory, in part because he stated that it helps people to feel included and to love themselves, according to him. When asked
directly if those goals are more difficult to accomplish with people who have lived with extreme deprivation, abuse, or mental illness, he said that it is more difficult. However, when he explained why he is an advocate of choice theory, he stated:

One of the major reasons [choice theory] resonates with me is because [Glasser] started out dealing with a population of people who were really not socially acceptable to themselves or to anyone else, and they were in prison. He helped them connect with him and each other and decide to become parts of society and contribute instead of just being parasites and fighting everybody. The old fight-flight, they got rid of that, they found a better way, and it’s to connect.

While John began the above comment with what appears will be a balanced and empathic stance, he finished it by placing all the responsibility on the incarcerated person. He all but dismissed the social structures that create the conditions that are frequent precursors to incarceration by referring to incarcerated people as “parasites.” This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Other Observations about Participants’ Positions on Reform. Interestingly, the two Black men in the study had divergent positions on prison reform. This may be because their family backgrounds are very different. Both men are well-educated. However, the education of their families differed, setting them up for different perspectives. Malik’s parents and grandparents were college-educated, but Darius was the first person in his family and his community to earn a college degree. Both men were victims of discrimination socially and professionally, but Malik’s ancestral foundation of higher education appeared to distance him
more from an abolitionist position than Darius, who did not have college-educated family members.

**Summary of R3 findings.** Overall, in the intersectional analysis of this question, race and gender had little to do with activists’ positions on the prison reform continuum. Education may be an identity that influenced the participants’ positions on prison reform. Education alone did not affect activists’ positions, but education combined with intimate knowledge of how people with mental illness or other less privileged personal identities are treated in the criminal justice system may have influenced a participant’s reform position to be more abolitionist. The most salient identity influencing activists’ positions on the prison reform continuum was their intimate knowledge of the dark side of the prison system and mental illness. The more intimate their knowledge, the more firmly abolitionist their views were.

**Related Findings**

Two noteworthy areas of related findings emerged from the data. The first area was the screening survey response and eligibility patterns. The second area was participant awareness of the over-representation of Black men in jails and prisons. Those findings are discussed below.

**Screening Survey Response and Eligibility Patterns**

This study began with some difficulty in locating an appropriate participant sample. To remedy that, criteria for inclusion in the study that the researcher determined was unnecessarily restrictive was removed. The nine eligible participants who emerged were not equally strong, as measured by the screening survey. Some participants had very strong eligibility scores, while others were marginal. Those survey response and eligibility patterns of people invited to participate in the survey provide valuable information when viewed intersectionally.
Black women completed the survey at the lowest rates of any race-gender combination. The only Black woman who completed the survey was eligible to participate in the study, but stated that she preferred to be used as a backup if the researcher could not otherwise obtain the desired participant sample.

The response patterns of White men are concerning on a number of counts. They had the lowest eligibility rates of all race-gender combinations when completing the screening survey. Of the two White men who participated, one had a strong eligibility score and the other barely qualified after the criteria for inclusion were adjusted. There was one other White man, a Lutheran pastor, who had a strong eligibility score, but he declined to participate in the interview portion of the study. The remaining White men who completed the screening survey had very low eligibility scores. Additionally, more White men than other participants indicated that they did not get involved in criminal justice activism.

Finally, Black men and White women produced the highest eligibility scores from the screening survey and were the most willing to participate in the study. Their eligibility scores demonstrated an elevated intersectional awareness compared with other survey completers. In the interview portion of the study, their responses supported their higher levels of intersectional awareness observed in the screening survey.

Overall, of the four race-gender combinations of people invited to complete the screening survey, it was most difficult to obtain a participant sample of Black women and White men. The graph below summarizes information about invitee eligibility and participation.
Carceral Oppression of African-Americans

All participants acknowledged the over-representation of Black men in United States jails and prisons. Although it was not the focus of this research, the prevalence of those responses cannot be ignored. Each participant’s intersectional awareness included some knowledge of Black oppression and the over-incarceration of Black men. However, the Black participants brought an intimate understanding of those social injustices to the study, which informed their intersectional awareness.

Perspectives of African-American participants on African-American carceral oppression. Even though Malik is a highly-educated Black man with a high-level position in his school district, he stated that his identity as a Black man generally means that he has to work harder than his White counterparts to prove his competence. Outside of the professional arena, those differences are even more stark, affecting survival. He commented, “What I have to do to survive is totally different than what you have to do to survive because there’s a level of comfort
with you because you’re White. There’s a level of discomfort with me because I’m Black.” He supported that assertion by sharing a chilling observation of how that plays out in the criminal justice system. He compared the outcomes of mass shooters, who are typically White men, with encounters Black men have with police that should be much less serious but are often fatal:

How many serial killers these past three to five years have been found alive? And we know they’ve killed innocent people, like the guy who did the theater shooting in Colorado. Unfortunately, the guy who did the shooting down in Charleston, I think I told you I lost a family member in that shooting, he [the shooter] was found alive, and a host of many others, but I give you those two examples. Even the guy down in Parkland who did the shooting, he was found alive. So you look at that, and they’re all White, and they were all found alive, and we know that they killed innocent people. Whereas, you have innocent Black men who look suspicious and have been shot and killed by the cops. So you present that kind of information to them and people start to open their eyes, and they start to understand the struggle of other people.

Darius discussed the life-and-death fear of police that is common among Black people in the United States. As a Black man who grew up in an oppressed area in the South, he had first-hand experience with the role of oppressed identity in criminal justice, and stated that it scares him:

Talking about scary, scary is as a Black man you know that you’re educated and that you have all your ducks in a row and you’re a law-abiding citizen, and when a blue light gets behind you, you almost piss your pants. That’s scary. My wife and I got stopped by the police and she started crying because she didn’t know if I was about to die. That’s scary.
Darius and Malik both described how the oppression of Black people has caused trauma in the Black community, with many Black people coping with undiagnosed mental illness.

Darius explained:

A lot of our Black men have mental illness that stems from trauma… a lot of Black men, especially in the poverty-stricken communities, deal with trauma. They saw their mama get beat. Trauma from not eating, hungry. Trauma from seeing their first cousin get shot in the head. Of course you’re suffering from trauma.

Darius expressed that if awareness is not raised about those dynamics and if society does not begin addressing them through appropriate rehabilitative and therapeutic approaches, Black men suffering from mental illness related to trauma will continue to be inappropriately incarcerated and die at high rates.

Malik described many personal experiences and experiences of family members that highlighted how Black and White people continued to be treated differently in recent decades, as well as in the present day. One story he shared was about his parents attending segregated schools and receiving used text books after the White students were finished using them. His parents told him that when the White students knew their used text books were being sent to the Black students, they would write racial slurs throughout the pages. He stated that had long-lasting psychological effects on many Black children. Those events occurred in fairly recent history:

We can’t underestimate the effects of segregation… The type of books that my parents received [in school] a generation ago, they graduated high school in 1970, but during that time they received books that were typically outdated, five years old, after White school districts used them. Those books were coming to them with lots of racial slurs in them.
The psychological impact of what kids experienced in their lifetime and the effect it has on them...

Such experiences can lay the foundation for psychological trauma that is often associated with increased risk of incarceration.

Malik also explained the trauma of oppression in historical terms, explaining that hundreds of years of oppression and abuse continue to impact present-day Black lives. He indicated that the hundreds of years it took to subjugate Black people cannot be overcome in a few short decades:

When you are four hundred years behind, it’s tough to catch up. There’s a little cartoon that I saw a couple years ago, and it had a Black person and a White person about to run a race, and the animation depicted life and experiences of African Americans. They were on the starting line about to start the race. The guy shot the gun to start the race and the White guy takes off, and he’s running, running, running. He has this major head start before the Black person is even allowed to start. So you look at that influence, and that’s reality. We can’t underestimate the effects of slavery.

When discussing which groups of people are incarcerated at the highest and lowest rates in the United States, Ann stated that Black people and other people of color are incarcerated at the highest rates. She also stated that she does not believe that it is because Blacks and other non-White people engage in criminal activity at higher rates:

I don’t think it’s necessarily that we commit more crime, but that the laws are just written outside of our favor, so that it’s easier for us to [become incarcerated], because of our cultural situations. Poverty plays a big role. I feel like all of those elements make it a
perfect storm for people of color to be incarcerated in greater numbers than people who are not of color, people of other races, Europeans as opposed to people of color. Ann’s comments above acknowledge the multiplicity of factors that maintain a Black underclass. Her observations support Malik’s assertion that the effects of hundreds of years of historical oppression are not easily overcome: the remnants of earlier oppressions have continuously morphed into new social structures that oppress Black communities. Ann’s comment “the laws are just written outside of our favor” is an observation that Jim Crow still exists in the United States criminal justice system.

**Perspectives of non-African-American participants on African-American carceral oppression.** Participants who were not Black expressed awareness of Black oppression. Philomena spoke of how “the poor and the Black get incarcerated for minor things compared to the White and wealthy. It just seems so obvious to me and that upsets me.” Annette acknowledged that her race is an advantage, especially in the South where she lives. She indicated that as a White woman, she does not have the same worries and fears about basic survival and other concerns that Black people face daily. Greg also acknowledged his privilege as a White man. In addition, he stated that the South has an unpleasant history of slavery and segregation to overcome. Natalie talked about the historical grief of hundreds of years of Black oppression. She also stated that the present-day criminal justice system evolved from Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation. Each of the above non-Black participants who acknowledged their privilege expressed an understanding of how being born Black continues to erect social obstacles for people in the United States.

John was another White participant who acknowledged his privilege. However, unlike other participants, he was almost dismissive of the role of race, gender, poverty, or any other
identity in incarceration patterns. He indicated that all behaviors, including those that result in arrest, are choices regardless of a person’s life circumstances or struggles.

**Summary of Related Findings**

The data revealed two areas of related findings: survey response and eligibility patterns, and participant awareness of the over-representation of Black men in jails and prisons. Those two findings did not directly address the research questions; however, they were important related findings. The response and eligibility patterns impacted who was included in the study, and therefore impacted the findings that emerged. The rich and detailed information provided by participants about Black oppression underscored its importance and could not be ignored in any exploration of incarceration in the United States. McLeod’s (2017) assertion, introduced in Chapter 3, eloquently articulates this notion:

> Criminal processes in the United States assumed their especially degrading and dehumanizing character through historical practices of racial subordination that have led blackness and criminality to be connected in the American imagination. These racial dynamics generally inform the American tolerance for penal severity, thoroughly infecting U.S. penal practices and modes of thought about crime and punishment. Racialized ideas about crime and imprisonment influence criminal law’s harshness and violence, in other words, even when criminal suspects and defendants are not African-American. (McLeod, 2017, p. 663)

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented themes that emerged from in-depth interviews of nine participants who identified as activists for criminal justice reform for people with mental illness. Seven
themes that address the research questions emerged from the interviews, which are summarized in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Participants’ identities, including their families of origin, their relative privilege, their family histories or other relevant histories, and the struggles they did or did not experience had an impact on their views of and motivations to be involved in criminal justice reform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectional Awareness</td>
<td>Awareness of the struggles of various identities informed participants’ understandings of current incarceration patterns and participants’ support of reform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridging</td>
<td>Activism took the form of bridging: participants used empathy and intersectional awareness in conversations to build understanding of or between dissimilar others in order to promote social justice and change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Awareness</td>
<td>Participants articulated the need for education about mental illness: raising awareness about its prevalence, the human struggles associated with it that often result in arrest and incarceration, and the need for treatment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Activist efforts that focus on dispersing justice equitably for people with mental illness must include treatment and follow-up, include all stakeholders in developing policies and laws, and be transparent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Participants’ beliefs were grounded in a personal code of ethics or spirituality that motivated them to advocate for social justice for people with mental illness and other marginalized and disenfranchised people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harms of the Criminal Justice System</td>
<td>Participants had differing degrees of awareness of the harms of the criminal justice system for people with mental illness and others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5. Summary of themes that emerged from participant interviews.*

Because this was both a narrative inquiry study and an intersectionality study, the interviews were designed to obtain more background information about participants than a general narrative study might identify. The background provided insights into participants’ intersecting identities, world views, and motivations for becoming involved in advocacy. The interviews were designed to address three research questions about the experiences of activists who advocate for criminal justice reform for people with mental illness. Specifically,
the research questions explored whether activists supported more prison reformist or prison abolitionist goals, and what role relationships, identity, and intersectional awareness played in their advocacy efforts. Participant responses that provided insight to those questions were interpreted intersectionally. Additionally, other intersectional interpretations were gleaned from the survey response and participant eligibility patterns and the prevalence of participant mentions of Black oppression in the criminal justice system.

In the next chapter, the findings will be discussed in terms of implications for future advocacy and research study.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of activists who advocate for criminal justice reform for people with mental illness who are over-represented in United States carceral facilities (French, 1987; Gilligan, 2001; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; LeCompte, 2015; Lee & Prabhu, 2015; Soderstrom, 2007; Sultan, 2006). It examined relationships, intersectional awareness, and identity in the advocacy efforts and motivations of activists. A narrative inquiry approach was used within a critical research paradigm, and intersectional analysis was applied to the data. Data were primarily gathered from in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

A fair amount of literature exists about relational approaches in social movements (Cherry, 2006; Diani, 2009; Granovetter, 1973; Kraemer, 2007; Malhorta & Pérez, 2005; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993 & 2009; VanderPlaat, 1999), but no studies were found that focused on the topic of this study. This study contributes to the literature by investigating how some advocates engage in relational activism approaches for reforming how the criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness, a topic that had not yet been explored in relational activism literature.

Literature that examined intersectionality and identity from the perspectives of activists and advocates was also scarce. Most intersectionality literature concerns the identities of marginalized groups and those who oppress them (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Collins, 1990; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 2002; Cuádraz & Uttal, 1999). Much less literature explores how activists’ intersecting identities impact their advocacy efforts (Briscoe, 2005; Takacs, 2002), particularly the potential for bridging differences, unless they are members of the oppressed group being studied. This study contributes to the literature by examining the potential of using intersectionality, or intersectional awareness specifically, to
intentionally bridge identity differences as an activist strategy for criminal justice reform for people with mental illness.

**Addressing the Research Questions**

The seven themes that emerged from participants’ interviews provided insight for understanding how they use relationships, intersectional awareness, and identity in activism. The questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. How do connections built between activists and their audiences influence their audiences’ receptiveness to prison reform messages for people with mental illness?
2. How do identities prison reform activists share with their audiences mediate their ability to build connections with their audiences?
3. Where do prison activists fall on the prison reform continuum regarding people with mental illness?

**Discussion of R1 and R2**

Relationships were key to activists successfully influencing others. Previous scholars of social movements found that social movements that do not reach out to others through weak ties will not be successful in creating transformative change (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Diani, 2009; McAdam, 2009; Walgrave & Wouters, 2014). Without moving beyond their small cadre of already-committed members, the movements will stagnate and not be very effective in catalyzing change. Participants in this study appreciated that, but to varying degrees.

While all participants stated that there is a need for widespread mental-health and criminal-justice awareness, some appeared to act on that idea more than other participants, reaching beyond people who shared their identities to spread their advocacy messages. Other participants were more conservative in reaching out to influence others with whom they had little
shared identity. Even two participants who were most adamant about the need for prison
abolition rather than prison reform and the need for transparency regarding the treatment of
people with mental illness by the criminal justice system did not typically reach out to others
who had different identities than their own to spread their advocacy messages.

This suggests a complex response for addressing the first two research questions:
Participant-activists who reached out to others with whom they did not have a shared identity
were in the minority. Most participants used shared identity to build relationships with their
audiences and were able to use those connections to successfully influence their audiences. This
scenario does not intentionally build the weak ties through bridging efforts that Diani (2009) and
other social movement researchers (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Cherry, 2006; McAdam, 2009;
VanderPlaat, 1999; Walgrave & Wouters, 2014) identify as essential to building a movement for
transformational change. One implication for activists who want to catalyze transformational
change is to be intentional in building relationships with dissimilar others. That may require
reaching deep within oneself to find a less obvious nugget of one’s own identity that can serve as
a shared identity upon which to build a connection with another person whom the activist wishes
to influence to support criminal justice reform for people with mental illness. The researcher did
that unknowingly with one of the participants: One participant stated that he knew he liked the
researcher and agreed to participate in the research, in part because he liked her Bob Marley cup
and he also shares Bob Marley’s birthday. That tiny nugget of shared identity, being a fan of
Bob Marley’s music and lyrics, allowed a young Black man from the South and a middle-aged
White woman from the Northeast, who might not have otherwise had deep conversations about
social justice, to build a connection for having conversations about social change. Activists
cannot create transformational change without spreading their message beyond those who
already support the desired change (Diani, 2009; Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; McAdam, 2009). To accomplish that, activists may need to be creative in finding a common identity on which to build interpersonal connections to spread their advocacy messages.

**Discussion of R3**

Critical researchers are transparent about their positions on social justice issues (Charmaz, 2017; Ponterotto, 2005). This study was transparent about identifying as pro-prison-abolition for people with mental illness, and therefore sought to identify a participant sample of individuals who leaned toward pro-prison-abolition. However, most people are not familiar with the meaning of the term *prison abolition* as used in this study and, consequently, would not be likely to identify as prison abolitionists if asked directly. Therefore, a screening survey was developed to identify people with more abolitionist than reformist leanings.

Most of the participants identified by the screening survey supported more abolitionist/transformational than reformist/conservative ideals and policy changes: They favored systemic changes of social structures (Byrd, 2016; Davis, 2003). They advocated for treatment over punishment when possible, or treatment in combination with punishment for the most egregious offenses (Gilligan, 2015; Lee & Prabhu, 2015). They supported significant changes in sentencing that reflected less punitive, more therapeutic responses (Gilligan, 2015; Lamberti et al., 2001; Sultan, 2006; Yohanna, 2013). All of those preferred actions align with an ethic of abolition (Davis, 2003; Jackson & Meiners, 2010; Lenn, 2011; McLeod, 2015). Even the least abolitionist participants did not support an exclusively punitive approach for people with mental illness who commit crimes.

Some participants did not view as crimes certain behaviors that are labeled as crimes by the criminal justice system, but instead saw them as negative, self-harming, or less than ideal
behaviors that some people engage in, but that do not rise to the level of criminal. Participants also identified some behaviors that are labeled criminal as survival responses to oppressive life circumstances and social structures. Therefore, they advocated for a supportive, therapeutic, and rehabilitative model for behaviors in which social oppression was a strong likely factor. That recognition of some exceptions to labeling behaviors as criminal mirrors differences found in the literature (LeCompte, 2015; Levesque, 2010; Sultan, 2006). That is an important difference among people in the criminal justice reform conversation: Some scholar-activists identify certain behaviors as lifestyle behaviors rather than crimes (LeCompte, 2015; Levesque, 2010; Pustilnik, 2005). Additionally, many behaviors that may be labeled crimes for people without mental illness, such as disorderly conduct or criminal mischief, are often symptoms of mental health crises for people who have mental illness, particularly if they do not have access to therapeutic treatment due to poverty, joblessness, or other interfering factors (LeCompte, 2015; Sultan, 2006). Because scholars, activists, criminal justice professionals, and mental health professionals cannot agree on which behaviors are crimes (LeCompte, 2015; Levesque, 2010; Pustilnik, 2005; Sultan, 2006), it is difficult to achieve consensus on how much crime is attributable to people with mental illness versus people without mental illness. That same lack of consensus was evident among the participants in the study. Without agreement on which behaviors are and are not crimes as opposed to lifestyle behaviors or responses to social oppression, it is difficult to proclaim the superiority of one blanket response over another for how to respond to people with mental illness who commit crimes.

There were differing opinions among participants about how responsibility for one’s actions should be weighted when considering people with mental illness who engage in behavior labeled as criminal. Their responses mirrored the larger debate among scholar-activists about
current criminal justice practices (Byrd, 2016; Earle, 2015; Levesque, 2010; McLeod, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005) and impacted whether they emerged as more abolitionist or more reformist. Participants who claimed that each person’s behaviors that run counter to societal expectations require evaluation of his or her specific circumstances in order to determine an appropriately humane and effective response tended to fall in the prison abolition camp. However, even participants who took a harder line and claimed that anyone who committed a crime, regardless of mental illness, should receive incarceration also advocated for the person to receive treatment while incarcerated. Like most conversations related to people with mental illness who are involved in the criminal justice system, scholars, activists, and criminal-justice and mental-health professionals are divided on this point (Byrd, 2016; Earle, 2015; McLeod, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005): Different perspectives weight the burdens of responsibility differently for a person with mental illness who engages in behavior labeled as criminal. This is often apparent in language used within the criminal justice system, within the mental health system, among the general public, and among reform advocates (Arrigo, 1997; Byrd, 2016; Earle, 2015; McLeod, 2015; Pustilnik, 2005), and it was apparent in the language of the participants as well.

This suggests that part of the task of activists is to be intentional about working toward changing the language of criminal justice. Arrigo (2001) described the dominant criminal justice language as medico-legal, placing all the responsibility for changing on the incarcerated person. Pustilnik (2005) described the dominant criminal justice language as oriented toward a legal-normative mindset that views all criminal behavior as a failure of responsibility by the person engaged in the behavior without considering circumstances, such as lack of access to mental health treatment due to poverty or joblessness. Both the medico-legal (Arrigo, 2001) and legal-normative perspectives (Pustilnik, 2005) are inappropriate and skewed ways of viewing
behaviors that are the result of untreated mental health diagnoses (Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; Soderstrom, 2007). Changing the dominant criminal justice language concerning people with untreated mental illness could be an important strategy for activists to achieve criminal justice reform for people with mental illness (Arrigo, 2001; Ben-Moshe, 2013; Gilligan, 2015; Pustilnik). Criminal justice language, and language used by society in general, needs to reflect mental illness as human conditions worthy of empathy and treatment (Braman, 2004; DeFina, 2010; Soderstrom, 2007). A suggestion is for activists to be intentional in the words they choose when advocating for people with mental illness in order to start changing the language surrounding mental illness and criminal justice.

**Relational Activism and Intersectional Awareness**

Many people may not view their low-key, one-on-one interactions and attempts at persuasion of others as activism because only overt collective action, such as protests and rallies, may come to mind when they think of the term *activism*. Therefore, the screening survey included items to evaluate whether survey respondents took part in relational activism. In terms of insights gleaned for the purpose of successfully advancing social justice reform for people with mental illness, the survey response patterns were as informative and valuable as the information gathered through the interviews. The more intersectionally-aware participants were, the more involved they were in persuasive, relational interactions as an advocacy strategy. Understanding various identities enabled them to communicate with people of different identities to effectively engage them in conversations about criminal justice reform for people with mental illness.
**Intersectional Differences in Self-Identifying as a Relational Activist**

Many people over many years have claimed that the criminal justice system needs to be improved, but there has been no transformational reform in how the United States criminal justice system operates for a very long time (Davis, 2003; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; McLeod, 2015; Tonry, 2014). The purpose of this study was to investigate how relationship-building, intersectional awareness, and identities comingle as a potential activist strategy for transformational criminal justice reform.

There were intersectional differences among participants regarding whether or not they identified their low-key interpersonal communications as activism. In the screening survey phase of the research, more men than women indicated they did not get involved in criminal justice activism. Some early social movement research identified relational types of activism, as opposed to what is more commonly thought of as activism (e.g., protests, rallies), as in line with what is traditionally thought of as feminine values, characteristics, leadership styles, behaviors, communication styles, and so forth (Abrahams, 1996; Bantjes & Trussler, 1999). Some earlier researchers claimed that more subtle relational activism behaviors are not activism or leadership at all, or are not as impactful or valuable as traditional public-sphere activism (Tindall, Davies, & Mauboulès, 2003; Mohai, 1992; Mohai & Twilight, 1987). Most of those views come from earlier social movement research investigating environmental activism (Tindall, Davies, & Mauboulès, 2003; Mohai, 1992; Mohai & Twilight, 1987). Some of those studies claimed, and asked why, women were not as involved in and committed to environmental activism as men (Mohai, 1992; McStay & Dunlap, 1983; Tindall, Davies, & Mauboulès, 2003). Other studies countered by claiming that women were *at least* as involved and committed as men, but in more subtle, relational ways (Leiserowitz & Fernandez, 2008; Little, Ilbery, & Watts, 2009; O’Shaugnessy &
Kennedy, 2010; Ruddick, 1990). In the context of this debate in activist literature, it is possible that some of the men who responded to this study’s screening survey did not see themselves as activists because they hold fast to an overt, rather than subtle and relational, definition of activism. The men who were selected to participate in the study did engage in relational activism, but several who completed the survey claimed they did not.

**Intersectional Differences in Participation**

Black women were the least likely to accept the invitation to participate in the screening survey for this study and were, in turn, the least represented in the interview portion of the study. Of the three Black women invited to complete the screening survey, only one completed it. That was an unexpected phenomenon. The researcher anticipated and hoped to secure more participation of Black women. Given that historically Black women lag behind both Black men and White women in achieving social equality (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1996), the researcher anticipated that Black women would be more willing participants than others in this critical research about a social justice issue. In other words, it was hoped, and even anticipated, that Black women, having historically experienced longer social oppression than either Black men or White women, would be more interested in participating in this social justice research that championed the interests of another oppressed group.

However, Black women expressed reluctance to participate. The reason for the reluctance is unknown to the researcher. However, a possibility comes to mind. Perhaps the historical marginalization of Black women in academia and in society as a whole is a factor. Black women scholars developed Black feminism decades ago when they perceived that their needs were not being addressed by either feminism or critical race theory (Collins, 1990;
Crenshaw, 1989). Neither of those orientations considered the intersections of oppression experienced by Black women as both Black and female. Perhaps among some Black women there is a lingering distrust of not being represented authentically in research, which could have been part of the reason Black women were hesitant to respond to invitations to participate in this research. Black women could have a more cautious approach to participation in research to protect themselves from misrepresentation because of academia not fully addressing their needs before the emergence of Black feminism and intersectionality theory.

The sample size of this study was very small and is, therefore, not generalizable. However, if the response patterns of the Black women who were invited to participate in the study are indicative of a more widespread tendency of Black women to decline participation in critical social research, that could be cause for concern. If Black women, who are arguably one of the most historically-oppressed groups in the United States (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; DeGraffenreid v General Motors, 1977; Gross, 2015; Truth, 1851), are reluctant to participate in critical social research, then their voices will not be represented as fully as others in scholar-activism. Researchers would do well to make an effort to reach out to Black women to help them feel comfortable with participating in social justice research. It is important that the ideas and concerns of Black women be included and addressed as fully as those of other groups to achieve a balanced perspective and movement toward a more just society.

Another troubling finding from the screening survey was that not all White men who were eligible to participate in the interview portion of the study agreed to participate. Six survey invitations were completed by White men in order to obtain two who were both eligible and willing to participate. For example, one White male who had a very strong eligibility score declined to participate, despite being a church pastor and a person whom one might expect to be
concerned about issues of injustice. That person spoke often of the importance of relationships in his sermons. A possible explanation for his declining to participate in the interview portion of the survey could be that he had an intellectual understanding of intersectionality but lacked the deeper empathic understanding that would motivate him to participate in the interview portion of the study.

**Intersectional Differences in Supporting Reform**

The findings from participants that were directly related to the research questions and the related findings should not be considered separately if scholar-activists are to explore strategies that are most effective. The screening survey response patterns were at least as important as the interview responses from participants in understanding the impact of intersectional awareness in their advocacy. Problems that need to be addressed from a social justice perspective were revealed by the screening survey response patterns.

Intersectional awareness and relational activism are concerned with bridging gaps in understanding in order to promote social justice (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Curtin, Stewart, & Cole, 2015; Kraemer, 2007; Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Macias & Williams, 2016; Malhorta & Pérez, 2005). Black men and White women produced the highest eligibility scores, which reflected their intersectional awareness, on the screening survey; and they were the most willing to participate in the study. A possible explanation is that they bridged understanding gaps based on their shared oppression relative to White men and are therefore better equipped than White men to empathize with others. The privilege of White men appeared to create a roadblock to their ability to understand and appreciate the degree to which social structures and historical oppression influenced a person’s path to incarceration, with one exception among the White men who completed the screening survey.
Historically considering the social capital and privilege of Black men, White men, Black women, and White women, one can place them in a hierarchy of privilege and social capital: White men secured the most privilege and social capital first, followed by Black men and White women, with Black women securing privileges and social capital last among those four race-gender combinations (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1996; Thompson, 2013). This was borne out in this study and in the review of research literature.

![Figure 8: Historical hierarchy of privilege and social capital in the United States by race and gender.](image)

Viewed from this historical perspective of acquiring social privilege and capital (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1996; Thompson, 2013), some possibilities come to mind regarding who was willing to complete the screening survey and who was eligible to move on to the interview portion of the study based on their intersectional awareness. The screening survey was designed to obtain a sample of individuals who had at least minimal intersectional awareness. White men had the lowest eligibility scores, with the least intersectional awareness. It is possible that their long-standing privilege and social capital
have distanced them from understanding the struggles of others, even when those struggles are quite apparent. With more distance comes less empathy for the plights of others (Buber, 1970; Doob & Webster, 2014; Lenn, 2011; Rubinow, 2014). White men in the United States, as a whole, have not had to earn privilege -- it was a given (Alexander, 2010; Davis, 1998; Hinton, 2015a; Lyons & Pettit, 2011; McLeod, 2015; Truth, 1851). When one does not struggle for privileges, one often does not fully appreciate on a deep level the struggles others must engage in to obtain those same privileges (Lee & Prabhu, 2015; Liasidou, 2016; Martensen, 2012; Rubinow, 2014; Silva, 2012; Taylor, 2014; Truth, 1851). Therefore, it is not surprising, but it is concerning, that White men displayed the lowest intersectional awareness scores on the screening survey and supported the least transformational changes for how the criminal justice system responds to people with mental illness. It suggests that empathy for dissimilar others does not come easily to them.

This is concerning because the majority of people in the highest leadership and policy-making positions in the United States are White men (Alexander, 2010; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008; Cooper, 2013; Crenshaw, 1988; Hinton, 2015a). Among the most marginalized people are Black men and women and people with mental illness (Gilligan, 2001; Gross, 2013; Kinsler & Saxman, 2007; McLeod, 2015; Rampey et al., 2016; Thompson, 2013; Wacquant, 2010). If the people in the highest governing and policy-making positions are not representative of the marginalized people they serve and cannot even draw upon empathy derived from a basic intersectional awareness of those marginalized people, those in governing and policy-making positions are not capable or qualified to make decisions in the best interests of the marginalized people (Buber, 1970; Cooper, 2013; Gross, 2013; Kohler-Hausmann, 2015; Lenn, 2011).
If that is the case, and it appears to be, then the difficult task of activists is to bridge understanding of those in power to the marginalized people over which they have power. Highly intentional efforts are required by activists to reach on a deep human level of understanding the most intersectionally-unaware and disconnected people who hold power to make decisions about others. Mental-health and criminal-justice activists would do well to consider targeting White men in leadership positions who have the power to influence access to privilege and social capital for others, such as people with mental illness and Black men. Malhorta and Pérez (2005) presented the three ways of bridging as “bridging to community, bridging to power, and bridging to consciousness” (p. 47). The types of bridging that are most relevant to activist efforts to reach White men who are weak in intersectional awareness, especially those who hold positions of power and decision-making about law and policy, are bridging to consciousness and bridging to power.

This is a good place to re-visit one participant’s comments about why he is an advocate of choice theory and to discuss them in relation to privilege and marginalization:

One of the major reasons [choice theory] resonates with me is because [Glasser] started out dealing with a population of people who were really not socially acceptable to themselves or to anyone else, and they were in prison. He helped them connect with him and each other and decide to become parts of society and contribute instead of just being parasites and fighting everybody.

The use of the word “parasites” indicates that the participant’s statement does not appear to consider that behaviors of people living with extreme deprivation, abuse, or mental illness are not based completely on choice, but are greatly influenced by social structures that exclude them from mainstream society, sometimes causing the person to see the only available options as those
that are less socially acceptable. When asked directly, the participant stated that all behaviors are choices, and regardless of a person’s circumstances, they can choose to make good law-abiding decisions. He calibrated the scale of responsibility to weigh heavily on the marginalized individual, with little responsibility attributed to social structures that create and reinforce social imbalances. His comment does not appear to recognize that, by definition, mental health diagnoses alter the behaviors of people with those diagnoses.

Placed in the larger context of who did and did not qualify for the study based on the screening survey results, this suggests a much larger problem of understanding and equality. Overall, it was difficult to obtain a sufficient White male sample for participation in the study. On the screening survey, White men tended to have the lowest intersectional awareness scores, which was the primary criteria for eligibility. This is concerning because most major social structures in the United States have White males in a majority of the highest positions, most notably government, the judicial system, and the public school system (Blumenson & Nilsen, 2002; Cooper, 2013; Hinton, 2015a; McCarter, 2017; Silva, 2012; Wacquant, 2010). This is especially concerning when White males are in the highest positions in school systems, such as superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and assistant principals (Hinton, 2015b; Liasidou, 2016; McCarter, 2017). Overall, the study participants indicated that education of school children is where effective, transformative change needs to begin. However, if the majority of those in the highest school-leadership positions are privileged White men who do not understand or do not want to understand, or are not sympathetic to, the burdens the social structures White men created and placed on other identities, it is unlikely they will lead transformative change that will undo the skewed incarceration numbers of people with mental illness and other marginalized people. This underscores the need for targeted activist strategies
to influence White men to support criminal justice reform for people with mental illness, especially those in leadership positions.

**Limitations and Future Research**

An obvious limitation of this study is that because of its small sample size, results are not generalizable. However, that is one of critical research’s weaknesses as well as one of its greatest strengths. The strength of critical research is that it focuses on a specific need in context and is therefore highly-relevant to similarly-situated individuals. As future research adds the narratives of additional participants, a wider and more nuanced picture will develop.

Another limitation is that the study was focused on only one of the over-represented groups in United States’ jails and prisons. Future research could explore prison reform, particularly more abolitionist reforms, for other over-represented groups, including Black men, people struggling with substance abuse, people with intellectual disabilities, and people from high-poverty areas.

A third limitation was that much of the intersectional analysis of the study was dependent on the screening survey response patterns, because the interview data were collected from a very small sample. However, the combination of survey and interview data provided rich information for detailed intersectional analysis.

The use of a grounded theory approach is one suggestion for future research studies. Research that generates theory can inform policy decisions concerning prison reform and abolition. According to Speed (2006), “…activist research allows us to merge cultural critique with political action to produce knowledge that is empirically grounded, theoretically valuable, and ethically viable” (p. 66). Such an approach would have the potential of providing theoretical foundations for political and policy decisions, as well as addressing the need to reach people on a
level that moves beyond the pragmatic to catalyze transformational change (Doob & Webster, 2014).

Another suggestion for future research is to explore the reasons Black women choose to participate or decline to participate in critical and social justice research. It is imperative that their voices be given the same inclusion as other voices and that their unique and important perspectives and narratives be added to research studies. If there are factors hindering their willingness to participate, those factors need to be addressed.

Future research studies that investigate how to increase the intersectional awareness of White men are recommended. Until there is a demographic shift in leadership in the United States, all other identities are largely dependent upon White male leadership to create laws and policies in their best interest. Without a deep intersectional awareness, it is not likely that the interests of marginalized groups will be protected.

Finally, future research should include deep exploration of the link between mental illness and Black men and women, especially Black men. African-American participants indicated that a great deal of mental illness goes undiagnosed among Black men, setting them up for incarceration. There have long been biased social structures in the United States that have contributed to the over-representation of Black men in jails and prisons (Davis, 1998; Hinton 2015a; Hinton, 2015b; Kohler-Hausmann, 2015; McCarter, 2017; McLeod, 2017; The Sentencing Project, 2015; The Sentencing Project, 2017a; Wacquant, 2010; Western & Pettit, 2010). Future research could explore how adding mental illness to those biased social structures affects Black men, how those social structures contribute to the occurrence of mental illness among Black men, and how mental illness and social structures biased against Black men influence incarceration patterns among Black men.
Implications for Activist Practice

Several implications for activist practice were woven into the discussions above. Those implications are summarized below:

- Activists who want to catalyze transformational change would do well to be intentional in building relationships with dissimilar others. Activists cannot create transformational change without spreading their message beyond those who already support the desired change. To accomplish that, activists may need to be creative in finding a common identity on which to build interpersonal connections to spread their advocacy messages.

- Part of the task of activists is to be intentional about working toward changing the language of criminal justice. People with mental illness will benefit from activists being intentional in the words they choose when advocating for them in order to start changing the language surrounding mental illness and criminal justice.

- Highly intentional efforts are needed by activists to reach on a deep human level of understanding the most intersectionally-unaware and disconnected people who hold power to make decisions about others: Mental-health and criminal-justice activists could consider targeting White men in leadership positions who have the power to influence access to privilege and social capital for others, such as people with mental illness and Black men. Efforts focused on bridging to consciousness and bridging to power are suggested and recommended.

- Activists are advised to find ways to encourage Black women to participate in the conversation about mental health and incarceration so that their voices are not under-represented and so that their perspectives and messages are heard and included. A close examination of bridging strategies could be a good starting point.
Personal Implications for Activist Practice

The researcher intends to employ the strategies suggested above in her personal sphere of influence. Additionally, the researcher intends to look for opportunities to share this research with various stakeholders to motivate change. Currently, she hosts a website called Bar None Transitions (barnonetransitions.com) for the purpose of reaching out to the general public to educate and inform them on the issue of over-representation of people with mental illness and other over-represented groups in jails and prisons. She also plans to share this research with administrators in her school district. The principal of her school has planned monthly professional development meetings to address culture, poverty, and diversity for the remaining months of the current school year. The researcher will use those professional development meetings as opportunities to spread awareness of the link between mental illness and incarceration and the importance of interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline for students with mental illness. The researcher intends to be constantly searching for opportunities to connect with others and increase their intersectional awareness in order to encourage them to support positive social and policy change for people with mental illness.
References


doi:10.1207/s15326993es3801_4


doi:10.1111/1467-954X.ep9203090849


Kinsler, P. J., & Saxman, A. (2007). Traumatized offenders: Don't look now, but your jail's also your mental health center. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, 8*(2), 81-95. doi:10.1300/J229v08n02_06


U.S. Constitution, Amendment 13

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services (n.d.) *Mental health myths and facts.*


APPENDIX A

COURT CASES CITED

Bowring v. Godwin, 551 F.2d 44 (U.S. App., 1977)


Cooper v. Pate, 382 F.2d 518 (1967)

DeGraffenreid v General Motors, 558 F.2d 480 (8th Cir., 1977)


Jeffries v Harris County Community Action Association, 425 F. Supp. 1208 (1977)

Lam v University of Hawaii, 40 F.3d 155 (1994)


Phillips v Martin Marietta Corp., 400 U.S. 542 (1971)
APPENDIX B
CRIMINAL JUSTICE SCREENING SURVEY

The number in parentheses following each answer choice is the point weight assigned to that response. In Part 1, higher response weights indicate closer self-identification with identities of people who are over-incarcerated in the United States. In Part 2, higher weights indicate higher awareness of patterns of incarceration in the United States. In Part 3, higher weights indicate awareness of the relationship between mental illness and incarceration in the United States. In Part 4, higher weights indicate a higher tendency to support prison reform. This paragraph and item weights are not part of the survey seen by respondents.

Part 1 - Demographic information
The information requested in this section is an essential part of this study. Please respond to all questions in this section.

1. How do you identify your gender or sexual orientation? Please select the one that best describes you.
   a. Male (2)
   b. Female (0)
   c. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (2)
   d. Other. Please specify. (2) _______________________________________

2. How do you identify your race?
   a. American Indian or Alaskan Native (1)
   b. Asian (0)
   c. Black or African American (2)
   d. Hispanic or Latino (2)
   e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1)
   f. White (0)
   g. More than one race. Please specify. (2) ____________________________

3. How do you identify your current socioeconomic class?
   a. Low to low middle income (2)
   b. Middle to upper income (0)

4. How do you identify your socioeconomic class growing up, or your family of origin’s socioeconomic class?
   a. Low to low middle income (2)
   b. Middle to upper income (0)

5. How do you rate the K-12 education you received?
   a. Poor or mediocre (2)
   b. Average or better than average (0)
6. What is the highest level of education you have attained?
   a. Master's or equivalent, or any education above a master's degree (0)
   b. Bachelor's degree (0)
   c. Associate's degree, post-secondary certificate, or professional credential from a technical or trade school (0)
   d. Some college but no degree or other credential (1)
   e. High school diploma or GED (1)
   f. Less than high school diploma or GED (2)

**Part 2 - Awareness about patterns of incarceration**

The following questions ask about representation of incarcerated people. When a group of people is found in higher percentages in jails and prisons than in the non-incarcerated general population, we say they are over-represented in jails and prisons. For example, if the non-incarcerated general population in the United States was 5% Canadian, but the incarcerated population was 22% Canadian, we would say that Canadians were over-represented in United States jails and prisons. Which of the following groups, if any, do you think are over-represented in United States jails and prisons? **For each question, please select all that apply.**

7. Race/ethnicity: Which races or ethnicities, if any, are over-represented in United States jails and prisons? **Please select all that apply.**
   a. Whites / Caucasians (0)
   b. Blacks / African Americans (2)
   c. Latinos and Hispanics (2)
   d. Immigrants or people from other countries living in the United States. (2)
   e. No racial or ethnic groups are over-represented in United States jails and prisons. Racial and ethnic groups in the United States are incarcerated in proportionately the same percentages that they are seen in the general population. (0)

8. Socio-economic class: Which socio-economic class, if any, is over-represented in United States jails and prisons? **Please select all that apply.**
   a. Wealthy people (0)
   b. Middle class people (0)
   c. Poor people (2)
   d. No socio-economic class is over-represented in United States jails and prisons. Socio-economic groups in the United States are incarcerated in proportionately the same percentages that they are seen in the general population. (0)

9. Gender and sexual orientation: Which gender or sexual orientation, if any, is over-represented in United States jails and prisons? **Please select all that apply.**
   a. Men (2)
   b. Women (0)
   c. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender people (2)
   d. No gender or sexual orientation is over-represented in United States jails and prisons. People of various gender and sexual orientation identities in the United States are incarcerated in proportionately the same percentages that they are seen in the general population. (0)
10. Ability: Which ability groups, if any, are over-represented in United States jails and prisons? 

**Please select all that apply.**

a. People who have learning, intellectual, or physical disabilities (2)

b. People with a history or diagnosis of mental illness (2)

c. People with more than one disability (2)

d. People who do not have disabilities (0)

e. No ability group is over-represented in United States jails and prisons. Ability groups in the United States are incarcerated in proportionately the same percentages that they are seen in the general population. (0)

11. Drugs and alcohol: Which group, if any, is over-represented in United States jails and prisons? **Please select all that apply.**

a. People struggling with alcohol or drug addiction (2)

b. People who use illegal drugs but are not addicts (2)

c. People involved in selling, transporting, or manufacturing illegal drugs (2)

d. People with substance abuse addiction, non-addicts who use illegal drugs, and people involved in the drug trade are not over-represented in United States jails and prisons. They are incarcerated in proportionately the same percentages that they are seen in the general population. (0)

12. Education: Which education level, if any, is over-represented in United States jails and prisons? **Please select all that apply.**

a. People with a college education (0)

b. People with a high school education or GED (0)

c. People who have not graduated from high school or earned a GED (2)

d. No education level is over-represented in United States jails and prisons. People with each level of education are incarcerated in proportionately the same percentages that they are seen in the general population. (0)

**Part 3 - Incarceration and mental illness**

Please choose the answers that best describe your views. Some of the response options are lengthy, so please take the time to read them carefully to be sure you are selecting the answers that best describe your views. **Please select only one response for each item in this section.**

13. When people with a diagnosed mental illness commit a NONVIOLENT crime, they should

a. Receive the same punishment as any other offender (0)

b. Receive punishment that takes their mental illness into consideration (1)

c. Receive punishment, such as jail time, combined with mental health treatment (1)

d. Receive mental health treatment with no jail time (2)

14. When people with a diagnosed mental illness commit a VIOLENT crime, they should

a. Receive the same punishment as any other offenders (0)

b. Receive punishment that takes their mental illness into consideration (1)

c. Receive punishment, such as jail time, combined with mental health treatment (1)

d. Receive mental health treatment with no jail time (2)
15. Is the ‘three strikes’ policy appropriate for people with mental illness who are repeat offenders? (The three strikes law requires mandatory life imprisonment for people convicted of a "serious violent felony" and who have two or more previous convictions with at least one of those prior convictions being a "serious violent felony.")
   a. Yes, they should be treated the same as any other offender. (0)  
   b. No, backsliding is a normal part of the cycle of many mental illnesses, so they should receive treatment, not incarceration. (2)  
   c. No, they should receive treatment in an appropriate setting because incarceration makes mental illness worse. (2)  
   d. It depends on the severity of the crime. Please explain. (1) ________________

16. When considering people with mental illness who commit crimes, which statement do you most agree with?
   a. Punishment is appropriate for people with mental illness who commit crimes. (0)  
   b. Punishment combined with mental health treatment is appropriate for people with mental illness who commit crimes. (1)  
   c. All people with mental illness, regardless of the severity of their illness, can benefit more from treatment and rehabilitation than punishment and jail time. (2)

17. When considering people with mental illness who commit crimes, which statement do you most agree with?
   a. Incarcerating people with mental illness who commit crimes DOES keep society safe by keeping them away from society. (0)  
   b. People with mental illness who commit crimes cannot be rehabilitated, so incarcerating them DOES keep society safe. (0)  
   c. Incarcerating people with mental illness who commit crimes does NOT keep society safe because they return to society without receiving treatment for their illness. (2)  
   d. Incarceration combined with mental health treatment for people with mental illness who commit crimes DOES keep society safe because they return to society after receiving treatment. (1)  
   e. Incarcerating people with mental illness who commit crimes makes their mental illness worse and does NOT keep society safe. (2)  
   f. Incarcerating people with mental illness who commit crimes is inhumane, makes their mental illness worse, and does NOT keep society safe. (2)  
   g. Incarceration combined with mental health treatment is appropriate for some people with mental illness who commit crimes, but the majority should receive treatment without being incarcerated, and that is the best way to keep society safe. (1)

18. Which statement do you most agree with?
   a. When people with mental illness are incarcerated, it is usually because they committed a crime. (0)  
   b. When people with mental illness are incarcerated, it is usually because a noncriminal behavioral symptom of their illness attracted police attention. (2)
19. Which statement do you most agree with?
   a. People who HAVE a serious mental illness commit crimes at a HIGHER rate than people who do NOT have mental illness. (0)
   b. People who HAVE a serious mental illness commit crimes at a LOWER rate than people who do NOT have a mental illness. (2)
   c. There is NO DIFFERENCE in the rate of crimes committed by people who have a serious mental illness and people who do not have a mental illness. (1)

20. Which statement do you most agree with?
   a. People who have a serious mental illness USUALLY commit violent crimes. (0)
   b. People who have a serious mental illness RARELY commit violent crimes. (2)

21. Which statement do you most agree with?
   a. People who HAVE a serious mental illness commit proportionally MORE violent crimes than people who do NOT have a mental illness. (0)
   b. People who HAVE a serious mental illness commit proportionally LESS violent crimes than people who do NOT have a mental illness. (2)
   c. People who have a mental illness and people who do not have a serious mental illness commit proportionally about the SAME amount of violent crimes. (1)

22. Which statement do you most agree with?
   a. People with mental illness are only incarcerated when they commit crimes. (0)
   b. Many people with mental illness are incarcerated so they can receive treatment because there are not enough community resources to provide for their mental health needs. That IS an appropriate solution. (1)
   c. Many people with mental illness are incarcerated so they can receive treatment because there are not enough community resources to provide for their mental health needs. That is NOT an appropriate solution. (2)

Part 4 – View of current criminal justice system and involvement in activism
This section asks for your opinion of the United States criminal justice system and whether you are involved in any efforts to change it.

23. Which statement best describes your opinion of the United States criminal justice system?
   a. It's fine the way it is. (0)
   b. It's not perfect, but it's okay. (0)
   c. It needs some changes. (1)
   d. It needs a lot of changes. (2)
   e. It needs to be overhauled. (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If = a. It's fine the way it is. (0)
Skip To: End of Survey If = b. It's not perfect, but it's okay. (0)
24. Which statement best describes your level of involvement in trying to change the criminal justice system and influence others to get involved?
   a. I don’t get involved. (0)
   b. I sign petitions from sites like Change.org and post them on social media. (1)
   c. I only talk about it with people who already share my views about criminal justice. I don’t try to convince other people to share my views. (1)
   d. I look for opportunities to talk about it with people who don’t share my views about criminal justice so I can educate them and maybe change their views to get them involved in changing the criminal justice system. (2)
   e. I’m a low-key activist who talks about it with people (family, friends, coworkers, etc.) one on one, in small social groups, or on social media if the opportunity arises because I believe a soft-sell interpersonal approach gets better results and influences more people to change. (2)
   f. I’m involved in more public forms of activism, such as rallies, protests, and letter writing campaigns to government officials because I believe making a grand statement attracts more attention and gets better results and influences more people to change. (2)
   g. Other, please describe. (2) ______________________________________________

Skip To: End of Survey If = a. I don’t get involved. (0)

25. How successful have you been in influencing other people to AGREE that changes are needed in criminal justice?
   a. I haven’t influenced anyone to change their mind about it. (0)
   b. I’ve influenced one or two people to agree that change is needed. (1)
   c. I’ve influenced several or many people to agree that change is needed. (2)

26. How successful have you been in influencing other people to take some kind of ACTION to support criminal justice change? ‘Taking action’ can be something as subtle as talking one on one with other people, or as public as participating in a large protest.
   a. I haven’t influenced anyone to take action. (0)
   b. I’ve influenced one or two people to take action. (1)
   c. I’ve influenced several or many people to take action. (2)
APPENDIX C

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SCREENING SURVEY RESPONSE WEIGHTS AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The screening survey is designed specifically for this study to identify a purposeful sample of participants. Item weights in Part 1 were assigned according to how closely they match over-represented incarcerated identities in the United States. Item weights in Part 2 were assigned according to how closely they demonstrate an awareness of incarceration in the United States. Item weights in Part 3 were assigned according to how closely they demonstrate an awareness of the relationship between mental disability and incarceration in the United States. Item weights in Part 4 were assigned according to the level of criminal justice reform respondents thought was needed and their participation in criminal justice reform activism or advocacy. The criteria for participation are:

1) A demographically-diverse group of participants, identified by Part 1 items. Items in Part 1 are weighted for purposes of final analysis only to determine if any relationship exists between identities and support of prison reform.

2) An awareness of patterns of over-representation in incarceration in the United States, identified by Part 2 items.

3) An awareness of patterns of incarceration among people with mental disabilities, identified by Part 3 items.

4) An attitude of support of prison reform for people with mental disabilities, identified by Part 3 items.

5) A history of at least one instance of prison reform activism, identified by Part 4 items. For purposes of this study, activism is defined as any effort to influence or educate others with a pro-abolition message regarding the current U.S. penal system. Activism can be as low key as talking to a friend or signing a Care2 online petition, or as overt as organizing and/or participating in rallies and protests.

Part 1: Demographic Information:
Maximum points possible = 12
In this section, no minimum points are required for eligibility to participate in the study. Instead, responses in this section will be used to select a diverse group of participants from those who are eligible to participate in the study based on their response points in Part 2 and Part 3.

Possible points per item:
Q1 0 or 2
Q2 0 1 or 2
Q3 0 or 2
Q4 0 or 2
Q5 0 or 2
Q6 0 1 or 2
Part 2: Awareness about who is incarcerated in the United States:
Maximum points possible = 26
Eligibility criteria to participate in the study is a minimum of 14 points.

Possible points per item:
Q7  0  2  4 or 6
Q8  0 or 2
Q9  0  2 or 4
Q10  0  2  4 or 6
Q11  0  2  4 or 6
Q12  0 or 2

Part 3: Information pertaining to mental disability and incarceration:
Maximum points possible = 20
Boldface point values indicate an understanding of the relationship between mental disability and incarceration in the U.S., and a tendency toward prison reform. Minimum criteria of 10 points is required to participate in the study, with a preferred eligibility criteria of 14 points or more.

Eligibility exception for Q18-Q21: People who score 2 points on any of items Q18-Q21 in Part 3 are much more aware of mental health and incarceration than the average person, and will be eligible for participation in the study with a 1-point reduction in the minimum eligibility criteria for each item Q18-Q21 in Part 3 for which they have a response score of 2 points. For example, if they score 2 points each for responses to Q18, Q19, and Q21 in Part 3, their required Part 3 minimum score to be eligible to participate in the study will be 7 points instead of 10 points.

Possible points per item:
Q13  0  1 or 2
Q14  0  1 or 2
Q15  0  1 or 2
Q16  0  1 or 2
Q17  0  1 or 2
Q18*  0 or 2
Q19*  0  1 or 2
Q20*  0 or 2
Q21*  0  1 or 2
Q22  0  1 or 2
Survey participants who do not move beyond Q22 are ineligible to participate in the study.

Part 4: View of criminal justice system and level of activism:
Q23  0  1 or 2
Q24  0  1 or 2
Survey participants who score 0 for Q23 and Q24 are ineligible to participate in the study.

Q25  0  1 or 2
Q26  0  1 or 2
Survey participants must complete all survey questions to be eligible to participate in the study.
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

We have reviewed the purpose of this study, why you were selected to participate, the interview process, and the informed consent to audio-record the interview. Do you have any questions you want to ask me before we begin recording? (Answer questions if needed). I’ll turn on the audio recorder now and get started. Please state your consent to have this interview audio-recorded. (Record participant’s oral consent). Thank you. I’m going to start with some general background questions, then move into questions that are more specific to my research.

1. Please tell me about your background. What experiences do you think have contributed to who you are today?

2. How would you describe yourself? How would others describe you?

3. What are some of the most important things to you today? Why do you value them?
   a. Were those things always important to you? Did you always value them? Please explain.
   b. Is there any connection between the things you value the most and any events, experiences, or periods in your life?

4. On the screening questionnaire, you identified as being (state demographic information provided in survey). Do you think any of those identities have played a part in you having any particular advantages or disadvantages in your life? Please explain.
   a. Do you think your identity has been a factor in how hard you have had to work to achieve your goals compared to other people? Are there things you think you have been able to achieve or not achieve because of some part of your identity? Please explain.
   b. Do you think there is a relationship between your identities and the kinds of things you value? Please explain.

5. On the screening questionnaire, you indicated that the United States criminal justice system needs change, and that the level of change needed is (participant’s response to question 23 of the screening survey). What kinds of changes do you believe are needed?

6. You may not have ever thought of this before, but it’s possible that you do things in your everyday activities that support criminal justice reform activism. Can you think of ways that you incorporate activism into your daily life, sort of ‘leading by example’?
   a. What is a typical day like for you?
   b. Do you ever look for or recognize opportunities for criminal justice activism when you’re going about your everyday activities? These opportunities might involve something as low-key as talking with a friend or family member about your views or feelings on an important issue.
7. On the screening questionnaire, you indicated that the type(s) of activism you engage in is/are (participant’s response to question 24 of the screening survey). Will you please elaborate on that?
   a. Why do you prefer that/those type(s) of activism?
   b. If you were advocating for a different cause, such as children’s or animal rights or any other cause that interests you, would you go about it differently? Why or why not?

8. What do you think are some of the most important things you do as an activist?

9. You indicated that you have been successful in influencing others to change their minds to agree that change in the criminal justice system is needed. Will you talk about that?
   a. Describe some of the people you were able to influence. (Probe for demographic information about the people they were able to influence the most and least.)
   b. How were you able to influence them? (Probe for some relational and conventional approaches they used.) Describe conversations you had with those people. How did the subject come up?
   c. Thinking about the people you influenced to change their views of criminal justice, do you feel you had a bigger impact on some than others? Can you talk about that? Why do you feel you were more successful influencing some people than others? (Probe again for demographic information about the people they were able to influence the most and least.)

10. You indicated that you have been successful in influencing others to take action to support criminal justice change. Please tell me more about that.
   a. Describe some of the people you were able to influence. (Probe for demographic information about the people they were able to influence the most and least.)
   b. How were you able to influence them? (Probe for some relational and conventional approaches they used)
   c. Describe the kinds of action/activism those people participated in to support criminal justice change as a result of your influence.
   d. Thinking about the people you influenced, do you feel you had a bigger impact on some than others? Can you talk about that? Why do you feel you were more successful influencing some people than others? (Probe again for demographic information about the people they were able to influence the most and least.)

11. Have you ever intentionally tried to get to know somebody better to try to influence them on criminal justice issues? Will you talk about that? If not, do you think this would be a good activist strategy? Why or why not?

12. Describe your journey to becoming involved in criminal justice activism. How did you become interested in criminal justice issues enough to want to get involved and take some kind of action?
   a. Was there somebody who influenced you to get involved?
   b. How did that person connect with you to get you interested in the issues?
   c. How do you connect with others to get them interested
13. What groups of people do you think are incarcerated at the highest and lowest rates in the United States? *This question is to find out if the participant is aware of over-representation of certain identities in jails and prisons.*
   a. Why do you think that is?
   b. Do people in groups with higher incarceration rates commit more crime?
   c. Are there other explanations for the higher incarceration rates of some groups?

14. Your responses on the screening survey indicated that, when it comes to people with mental illness, in general, you favor mental health treatment over incarceration for people with mental **disabilities** who are accused of committing crimes. Tell me more about your views on this.

15. How did you feel when I disclosed in the introductory comments that you were selected to participate in this study because your responses on the screening questionnaire identified you as a prison reform activist?
   a. Before this interview, had you ever thought of yourself as an activist or a prison reformer? Please explain.
   b. Have you ever heard of term prison abolition? What do you think prison abolition is? What do you think the difference is between prison reform and prison abolition?

16. What do you think is needed to improve our criminal justice system in general?

17. What do you think is needed to improve our criminal justice system for mentally-disabled people? For other groups of people?

18. Is there anything we haven’t covered that you want to share?

19. Do you want to ask me any questions before we wrap up?

It’s really been a pleasure talking with you, and I want to thank you again for taking the time to do this. In about one to two weeks, I’ll send you a copy of the transcript of this interview for you to check for accuracy. Meanwhile, please feel free to call or email me if you think of any questions later. *(Provide a contact phone number and email address to the participant.)*

Renee Gallaway
Summary of which research questions are targeted by each interview question and probe:

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<tr>
<th>Question or Probe</th>
<th>RQ</th>
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Questions 18 and 19 do not address any particular research question. They instead offer an opportunity for the participant to share information that the participant thinks is important or relevant but was not addressed by the previous questions.