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Study Methodology

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2. STUDY METHODOLOGY

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Data for this investigation come from 36 qualitative in-depth interviews completed between February and April 2010. The aim of the research was to conduct a process evaluation of Gateway Foundation programming for state probation and parole clients in St. Louis and jointly produce a final report for the organization. The specific research questions focused on (1) the challenges men face as they attempt to overcome substance abuse; (2) how those challenges are related to past experiences with crime, including offending and victimization; and (3) the effectiveness of Gateway programming, from the points of view of program participants, including whether there are any perceived differences between men who participate in the program post-incarceration versus in lieu of incarceration.

THE GATEWAY FOUNDATION

The Gateway Foundation in St. Louis provides alcohol and drug treatment services for state and federal probation and parolees with identified substance use issues. The aim of the Gateway Foundation is to provide holistic treatment and services to help clients reenter society and obtain and retain sobriety. The current study exclusively focused on clients in Gateway's two state programs which serve only men.

Free And Clean Program

The Free and Clean (F&C) program was created in 1994 as a post-incarceration substance use treatment and reentry program. It is an out-patient program which provides individually crafted and holistic services for clients post release from incarceration. The services provided by the Free and Clean program are case management, individual and group counseling, and educational and occupational services. At the time of the research, the program served approximately 300 clients who visited between one and five days a week. Clients in the program were predominantly African-American with a small minority of whites and other races or ethnicities. The clients involved in this program either self-identify or have been diagnosed as having a substance use problem. After release from incarceration, clients are usually referred to the program through their probation or parole officer to help retain sobriety during and after reentry.

Partnership for Community Restoration Program

The Partnership for Community Restoration (PCR) is intervention/diversionary program designed for mostly high risk and/or gang-affiliated young males (typically between the ages 19 to 25). Clients in this program are on state supervision, but typically have not been previously incarcerated. Unlike the Free and Clean program, PCR clients are more likely to have been arrested or convicted of drug related offenses. The program served approximately 150 clients during the research, who were overwhelmingly African-American.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The research process began with an introductory presentation, tour, and question and answer session at the Gateway Foundation, followed by the presentation and discussion of preliminary research proposals, and refinement of research questions. Students then designed and completed qualitative in-depth interviews with Gateway clients, including 18 men participating in the Free & Clean Program and 18 participants in the Partnership for Community Restoration.

Prior to data collection, students (1) received intensive training in the methods and ethics of research, particularly with at-risk populations, (2) successfully completed the National Institute of Health's on-line training course on human subjects research, (3) signed a confidentiality agreement concerning their use of interview data collected, and (4) completed readings and classroom coverage of academic research on the needs and experiences of women upon reentry. Students also reviewed the research requirements approved by the University's Institutional Review Board and detailed in the project's Consent Form (Appendix B).

Sampling and Study Participants

Each student-researcher was required to conduct three qualitative in-depth interviews. Participants were identified for participation in the project through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling techniques.

The original study design involved the principal investigator explaining the purpose and nature of the project at the end of every F&C and PCR group session during a single week prior to data collection. Clients were informed that the study was voluntary and confidential and that they would receive a small token of appreciation (a \$10 giftcard) for their time. Those who wished to participate were asked to provide their name, counselor's name, and a contact phone number so that researchers could contact them if they were randomly selected from the pool of potential subjects. While this initially provided a substantial number of project volunteers, the technique proved generally unfruitful as most volunteers were difficult to successfully contact to schedule an interview time. Those who were scheduled had high rates of absenteeism at the agreed upon date and time. This inability to reach volunteers forced the project to modify its sampling design.

The project then had one to two researchers arrive at the Gateway Foundation near to the end of F&C and PCR group counseling or education sessions throughout the duration of the data collection period. With the help of administration and counselors, researchers were allowed to present the purpose and nature of the project and ask for study volunteers. If a large enough group of volunteers were obtained, random assignment was used. However, most commonly only enough subjects volunteered to match the number of researchers present. The final means of obtaining subjects involved researchers informing program staff of their presence and the staff presenting volunteers they obtained using an unknown selection process.

Table 2-1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the study sample. The vast majority (91%) were African American. They ranged in age from 19 to 50, with a mean age of 32.2. Most had not completed high school, and fewer than a quarter were employed at the time of the research. As noted, half were F&C clients and half were PCR clients.

Table 2-1. Sample Characteristics

	Number (%)
Race	
<i>Black</i>	34 (90.9%)
<i>White</i>	2 (9.1%)
Mean Age (years)	32.2
Mean Education	11.3 years
Employment	
<i>Employed</i>	8 (22.2%)
<i>Unemployed</i>	28 (77.8%)
Program	
<i>F&C</i>	18 (50%)
<i>PCR</i>	18 (50%)

Study Design

The primary data collection technique utilized for the project was qualitative in-depth interviews. These were semi-structured, with open-ended questions that allowed for considerable probing. Our goal was to gather data that could provide a relatively holistic assessment of Gateway clients' experiences with and interpretations of the Gateway program, as well as their experiences in drug markets. The use of semi-structured interview guides ensured that the interviews conducted by the 12 student-researchers were relatively consistent in content and format¹, but that research participants had the opportunity to fully express themselves without the influence of leading questions. After obtaining informed consent, each interview was audio-tape recorded and transcribed verbatim².

The comparative sampling strategy (including clients in both F&C and PCR) was chosen in order to allow the examination of different facets of the two programs from the perspectives of clients in the two programs, as well as ensuring a proper number of participants to interview. Miller (2005: 4) notes that comparative qualitative research strategies are particularly useful for strengthening "internal validity by allowing for more refined analysis and greater contextual specification." Qualitative research methods such as those used in this project do not produce generalizable data, but are particularly well-suited for examining social processes and patterns at the situational level, and the meanings people attribute to their experiences and behaviors.

¹ One interview was only partially completed, resulting in its availability for analysis in only around half of the research chapters that follow.

² Due to a tape malfunction, a portion of one interview was not transcribed verbatim, but reconstructed based on the interviewers' memory of the conversation.

Instruments

The interview guides were developed in a sequential and collaborative process, representing the general interests and research questions of each individual student. Each identified research topics of interest, and generated a set of preliminary questions. Once individual sets of questions were developed, students worked in teams to refine and sequence the interview guide. Once each group came to an agreement about the questions to be utilized, the professor reviewed and revised it for consistency and wording, sent it out for student-researcher comment, and finalized them. The final interview guide consisted of questions related to background information, the role of The Gateway Foundation, counselors, and probation/parole officers in treatment, substance use and initiation, conflicts or victimization arising from substance use, stigma, stress, and relapse. The interview guide was designed to capture student-researchers' individual areas of interest as well as topics useful to the staff at the Gateway Foundation. Questions were semi-structured, mostly open-ended, and allowed for probing when necessary.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted at two intervals during the semester, with the first round completed in February 2010. Data collection began with a review of the informed consent. Clients were asked if the interview could be recorded, and all respondents complied. Once the initial set of interviews was completed, students transcribed and exchanged their interviews with colleagues in the class. Each received feedback on content and interview techniques from two student-researchers and the professor. This feedback was designed to improve and refine the interview guide, and enhance the interviewers' skills for the second set of two interviews, which were completed in March and April 2010. Again, these interviews were transcribed and shared with other class members.

Data Analysis Procedures

The 36 interviews conducted for the project were pooled for each student's individual data analysis. Each then created a sub-set of data relevant to their research question. Student researchers initially used open coding to identify themes in the data, then utilized modified grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2006) and/or domain analysis (Spradley, 1979) to further refine their coding categories and complete the qualitative data analyses. Important to this process is the identification of common patterns in the data, as well as responses which deviate from these patterns. Each researcher then produced a report on their research topic, tied to the extant literature.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Several important study limitations are notable. First, for those students interested in general questions about men's experiences in drug markets, the sample was non-representative, as it only included men involved in Gateway Foundation programming. Likewise, for those students examining Gateway programming, our methodological approach does not allow us to provide quantitative or quantifiable evidence about the success of the program. Of particular utility for future research would be a mechanism to track program participants—during their involvement

with Gateway as well as for some period after this formal commitment ends. Such data would yield important evidence of the program's success in assisting men's recovery processes.

In addition, sampling challenges (described above) introduced bias due to the selection process used to identify research participants. The interviewed clients were all present at the program when many of the selections took place. In other words, several pre-arranged interviews fell through and the researchers were forced to ask for volunteers who were in attendance. This process may not capture the clients who may be failing the program due to consistent absenteeism, or who have dropped out of the program altogether. Therefore, the clients who were available created a convenience sample, with the attendant sampling challenges.

A final limitation of the present study concerns the small window of time in which the interviews took place. One of the problems that emerged due to the time constraints on the data gathering process was the inability to make significant changes to the research instruments. Since there was a limited amount of time to conduct the interviews, there were constraints in terms of adding questions to further flush out emerging themes. Another limitation created by the time constraints involved in the interviewing process was that there was no time to conduct follow up interviews, and each student was required to collect information for their own and their colleagues' research topics. As themes began to emerge in the data over the course of completing the interviews, the instruments utilized in this study were not designed to capture these emerging themes or explore them in greater detail.

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