

National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women

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Abuse History Among Incarcerated Women

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Large, government-sponsored studies do tend to find rates of prior abuse among female inmates to be around 50%. However, other studies, typically using more in-depth research methods, find much higher rates (as high as 95% of incarcerated women reporting prior victimization). Different research methodology likely accounts for the discrepancy. And there is good reason to believe, based on the understanding of the different methods, that the more in-depth studies have more accurate results.

Research methodology issues

- Browne, Miller, and Maguin (1999) do a good job of discussing the research methodology issues related to investigating levels of childhood and adulthood experiences of abuse. The main concern in terms of validity (accurately capturing all of the cases) relates to how the questions are asked. Poorly-defined or vague terms (e.g. “abuse”) can be problematic if the researchers and respondents have different interpretations of their meaning. Such terms may also lead to error in cases where the values or stigma attached to them inhibit a respondent from answering accurately (over- or under-reporting).

Using operational definitions of terms with concrete is a way to reduce problems of differential interpretation and typically requires more questions to cover the range of activities that relate to a particular construct. A strength of the Browne et al (1999) study is their methodology: “All key measures were based on behavioral indices; respondents were never asked to label intimates as abusive in order to endorse a question or to respond to questions based on their personal definition of battery, abuse, or molestation.”

- Here’s how Browne et al (1999) describe the limitations of the government-sponsored studies in this area:

“Although the BJS sample was large and representative, the methodology used may have suppressed rates. Questions on victimization occurred near the end of the interview in a section on involvement with gangs, and only one question was used to screen for abuse histories. If respondents gave a negative response or refused to answer that question, no further questions were asked. The BJS methodology also required respondents to label actions they experienced as “abuse” in order to endorse the screening item – a technique less likely to reveal experiences with physical or sexual assault by intimates than behavioral indices describing actions without labeling them as inappropriate.”
- Harlow (1999) acknowledges the impact of the methodology on accuracy of reporting and notes that the BJS statistics are derived from surveys that asked respondents: “Have you ever been physically or sexually abused?”; additionally in some surveys: if “anyone ever pressured or forced you to have any sexual contact against your will, that is, touching of genitals [breast, or buttocks, or oral, anal, or vaginal sex]”

- Browne et al (1999) excluded individuals with severe mental illness and those “considered to be mental health risks” from the study. Those excluded may have higher rates of prior abuse and thus their reported rates of two thirds of incarcerated women having histories of IPV may even be an underestimate of the prevalence of abuse history among the female prison population overall.

How many incarcerated women have been abused?

- Among women incarcerated in Ohio, seventy percent “reported sexual abuses that in most states would qualify as *rape* or the most serious *sexual assaults*... More than a quarter of the respondents (26.9%) reported having three or more sexual abusers... 54.5% of the sample responded that they had been ‘raped,’ 11.5% reported ‘gang rape,’ 18.4% were sexually penetrated by an authority figure, 38.6% reported someone using alcohol or drugs to sexually penetrate them, 22.0% reported anal rape by a penis, 41.9% reported vaginal rape by a penis, 36.1% reported oral rape, and 50.1% reported child sexual violations or abuses.” These reports do not include sexual violations occurring in prison or jail (McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2008, p. 1120).
- Blackburn, Mullings, and Marquart (2008) found that 68.4% of women who were imprisoned in the South reported experiencing sexual victimization in their lifetimes; 17.2% reported sexual victimization while in prison.
- In a random sample of 402 women incarcerated in Metro State Women’s Prison in Atlanta Georgia, Cook, Smith, Tusher, & Raiford (2005) found that 78.4% of the participants reported physical abuse by a partner, 60.3% reported threats to kill, 47.1 reported being stalked, 42.9% reported being sexually abused as a child, 42.9% reported being physically abuse as a child, and 27.3% experienced adult sexual abuse. In addition to partner and child abuse, many of the participants reported experiences of other traumatic events as measured by *Traumatic Life Events Questionnaire*. For instance, 83.6% experienced the unexpected death of a loved one, 35% had been robbed, and 29.8% were assaulted by a stranger. Finally, a subsample of women (n=206) were asked about experiences of homelessness, and “almost one-third of the sample [n=65] reported having been without a place to live for at least 7 days” (p. 118). These women experienced significantly more traumatic events than those reporting no homelessness.
- In a sample of 65 incarcerated women, “86.2% of the participants reported a history of childhood sexual abuse, 56.9% reported a history of childhood physical abuse, 67.7% reported a history of sexual assault in adulthood, and 84.6% reported a history of physical abuse in adult relationships.” 43% of the women reported having been victimized by all four types of abuse (both physical and sexual abuse in childhood and adulthood). Only 5% of the sample did not report any abuse (Bradley & Davino, 2002)
- In a sample of 150 women incarcerated in Bedford Hills Maximum Security Correctional Facility in New York, 70% had experienced severe physical child abuse; 59% experienced sexual abuse in childhood; 75% reported severe physical intimate partner violence: “Sixty percent reported being kicked, bitten, or hit with a fist,; over half (57%) reported being beaten up; 50% reported being hit with an object abuse to do damage. Even when only the most severe sounding items are considered, 40% of all respondents reported being choked, strangled, or smothered; 36% reported being threatened with a knife or gun; and one quarter reported being cut with a knife or shot at by an intimate partner. In addition, over one third (35%) reported that they had experienced marital rape or been forced to participate in other sexual activity.” 36% of the women reported that their

partners had threatened them with death and 16% reported that their partners had threatened to kill the women's family members (Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999)

- Greenfeld and Snell (1999) found that "Nearly 6 in 10 women in State prisons had experienced physical or sexual abuse in the past; just over a third of imprisoned women had been abused by an intimate in the past; and just under a quarter reported prior abuse by a family member."
- BJS surveys find that nearly half of the females in "correctional populations" (including State prison inmates, Federal prison inmates, jail inmates, and probationers) and ten percent of males report abuse prior to their incarceration. A greater proportion of the abuse of males is accounted for in childhood than is abuse of females. Perpetrators of the abuse against males were primarily parents, guardians, or other relatives (57-70%); wives, ex-wives, and girlfriends accounted for 3-7% of the perpetrators. Among female offenders, the majority of perpetrators were husbands or boyfriends (Harlow, 1999)
- According to a report by the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, 80% of the women in California's prisons have experienced some form of abuse either in childhood or in adulthood. Over half (60%) reported physical abuse as an adult, primarily perpetrated by spouses or partners. Of all the women in the sample, 23% reported sexual abuse as an adult, and nearly half (48%) reported emotional abuse or neglect as a child (Bloom, Chesney-Lind, & Owen, 1994).
- Mary Gilfus summarizes a lot of the literature in this area in her December 2002 article, "Women's experiences of abuse as a risk factor for incarceration." She does not present original findings or analyses in this article but it may be helpful as an overview and is available on-line: <http://www.vaw.umn.edu/documents/vawnet/arincarceration/arincarceration.pdf> or <http://www.vaw.umn.edu/documents/vawnet/arincarceration/arincarceration.html>

History of abuse among incarcerated versus non-incarcerated women

- Among a sample of 266 women – 157 incarcerated and 106 non-incarcerated – Severson, Postmus, and Berry (2005) found that "Victimization is high for all the women in the study. Beyond this ... women in prison have a significantly higher prevalence of sexual assault, particularly for the experience of rape. The women in prison also have a significantly higher prevalence of violence with intimate partners, both physical and psychological. ... Finally, a significantly higher proportion of women in prison report experiencing sexual abuse as a child" (p. 227).
- Similarly, compared to women in the community, incarcerated women are more likely to have been victimized in childhood and adulthood and to have suffered more incidents of abuse, even when compared to non-incarcerated women who have sought assistance from sexual assault and domestic violence services (Severson, Postmus, & Berry, 2009).
- Tusher and Cook (2010) examined sexual and physical revictimization experiences among a sample of 188 incarcerated women and 171 nonincarcerated, low-income, urban women.
 - They found significantly higher rates of child abuse and physical and sexual revictimization among the incarcerated women compared to the nonincarcerated

women. Among incarcerated women, 100% of the 86 women who reported childhood physical abuse and 96.3% of the 109 women who reported childhood sexual abuse reported physical revictimization as a an adult. The majority of these same women reported sexual revictimization as an adult (87.2% of those with childhood physical abuse and 79.8% of those with childhood sexual abuse).

- The authors conclude, “These results suggest that circumstances or experiences for women who became incarcerated differed from those of women who were not incarcerated in such a way that women who became incarcerated were more likely to experience adult victimization” (p. 14).

Impact of Past Abuse

- Flemke (2009) conducted in-depth interviews with 37 incarcerated women to explore the role past traumatic experiences played in their experiences of rage prior to incarceration.

“Almost 90% of those interviewed described at least one vivid memory from childhood that still triggers them to feel rage as adults. Of women who were able to identify such experiences, all but two fell into four significant categories of trauma” [physical abuse, sexual abuse, feeling unprotected, and observing domestic violence] (p. 128).

Women described that these memories caused them to feel rage towards their partners (many of whom had been abusive toward the women) and act out violently. Flemke (2009) concluded, “It seems quite possible that many of the women who reported having rage and committing IPV were responding to being triggered by unresolved trauma from their past” (p. 134).

Past abuse as a risk factor for abuse while incarcerated

Women in prison have high rates of prior victimization, which may contribute to victimization while in prison.

- Wolff, Shi, and Siegel (2010) found: “In general, inmates, both male and female, who experienced victimization inside prison, independent of type of victimization and perpetrator [staff versus inmate], were significantly more likely to report having experienced victimization in childhood. Specifically, roughly two-thirds of male and female inmates experiencing victimization in prison reported being physically victimized prior to age 18 compared to roughly half of those who did not report experiencing victimization during the past 6 months ... Patterns for in-prison sexual victimization are similar... Male and female inmates experiencing in-prison sexual victimization were statistically significantly more likely to have experienced both childhood sexual and physical victimization than those not victimized in prison, except in the case of staff-perpetrated sexual acts in the female facility” (p. 477).

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