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CYCLES OF PAIN: RISK FACTORS IN THE LIVES OF INCARCERATED MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

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This study extends the risk factors model of background or social history analysis to the lives of incarcerated mothers. Interviews were conducted with a sample of incarcerated mothers. The presence of a number of criminogenic influences such as poverty, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and witnessing violence in the lives of women incarcerated for primarily nonviolent—largely drug-related—offenses and in the lives of their children were identified. The implications of these findings for understanding female criminality and breaking the so-called cycle of crime are discussed.

Women represent the fastest growing segment of the rapidly expanding U.S. prison population (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993). Approximately four out of five incarcerated women are mothers (American Correctional Association, 1990; Beckerman, 1994; Harm, 1992). The female jail population has grown an average of 11.2% annually since 1985 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997), whereas the male population has grown annually by 6.1% (Bloom, 1997). Between 75% and 80% of incarcerated women have children, and two thirds of these women have children under the age of 18 (Snell, 1994). Based on 1996 data, there were approximately 200,000 children of female inmates in the United States, at least 70% under the primary care of their mothers

We would like to thank the staff members of the various facilities in which this research was conducted for their cooperation and access. We are also extremely grateful to the women who participated in this study. Their willingness to share and the courage with which they shared sometimes very painful social histories made this research possible. The mailing address for all three authors is Psychology Department, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064; fax: 831-459-3519; e-mail: sgreene@cats.ucsc.edu (Greene), psyllaw@cats.ucsc.edu (Haney), and aida@cats.ucsc.edu (Hurtado).



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before the mothers' incarceration. Thus, even though women make up only a small percentage of our inmate population (about 10%), it is important to study this overlooked population because it is growing in number and because these women have a pivotal role as mothers in the lives of the next generation.

Research on incarcerated mothers and their children often focuses on how the children's lives are affected by their mothers' incarceration. Studies have examined and evaluated visits and contact between mother and child (Baunach, 1985; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Hairston, 1991a, 1991b; Johnston, 1995c; Stanton, 1980), care and placement of the children (Baunach, 1985; Beckerman, 1994; Ginchild, 1995; Johnston, 1995a; Reed & Reed, 1997; Sametz, 1980), legal issues with regard to custody and care (Barry, Ginchild, & Lee, 1995; Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Reed & Reed, 1997; Smith, 1995; Stanton, 1980), and interventions and social services (Hairston & Lockett, 1987; Johnston, 1995b; Weilerstein, 1995).

Not surprisingly, we know that children are profoundly affected by their mothers' incarceration. Many will suffer feelings of anger, fear, guilt, grief, rejection, shame, and loneliness. Studies have identified poor school performance (Lowenstein, 1986; Stanton, 1980) and aggressive behavior (Lowenstein, 1986; Sack, Seidler, & Thomas, 1976) in children of incarcerated parents. In addition to the loss and instability that the incarceration of their mothers brings, many children may be vulnerable because of the risk factors to which their families' difficult life circumstances have exposed them. Many of them may have experienced the very criminogenic factors that contributed to their mothers' incarceration, giving rise to a cycle of criminality. This study examines these interrelated issues.

RISK FACTORS AND CYCLES OF CRIME

Criminogenic conditions are those environments and experiences to which people are exposed that increase the likelihood that they will engage in criminal behavior. Masten and Garmezy's (1985) risk factor model of development states that "the presence of *risk factors* assumes that there exists a higher probability for the development of a disorder; as such, these factors are statistically associated with higher incidence rates [of crime]" (p. 3). On an individual level, vulnerabilities render people more susceptible to the effects of risk factors, and protective factors such as innate resiliency or outside support give them a special advantage in overcoming the consequences of encountered risk factors.

For example, children who suffer physical abuse are at a greater risk of failure at one stage of development, and this, in turn, leads to a greater probability of failure in subsequent stages. Abuse causes disruption in critical areas such as attachment, self-control, and moral and social judgments, which may lead to distorted and maladaptive beliefs about the social world (Wolfe, 1987; Wolfe & Jaffe, 1991). A lack of interpersonal trust in childhood often creates problems in adolescent and adult relationships. "Parental methods of *punishment* play an important role in the emergence of self control in children" (Wolfe, 1987, p. 103), and children with poor self-control show more aggression and lower social competence in peer relationships (Wolfe, 1987). Many children learn through modeling that aggressive behavior is a legitimate way to resolve conflict. Consequently, the experience of physical abuse is considered a risk factor for later aggressive behavior that may interact with other risk factors and lead to delinquent behavior (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990).

Children who have been sexually abused also suffer developmental adjustment problems and/or stress-related disorders (Wolfe & Jaffe, 1991). Sexual abuse "represents a more distinct form of maltreatment that encompasses betrayal of trust, physical violation, and coercion that affects children's development in diverse ways" (Wolfe & Jaffe, 1991, p. 292). Several studies show that the traumatic effects of childhood sexual abuse are related to the specific characteristics of the incident(s), such as the relationship of the abuser to the child, age of onset, duration and frequency of abuse, force, penetration, coping abilities, and positive support (Beitchman, Zucker, Hood, DaCosta, & Akman, 1991; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Conte & Schuerman, 1987; Finkelhor, 1994; Kendall-Tackett, Meyer Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Staples & Dare, 1996; Widom & Ames, 1994; Wolfe & Jaffe, 1991). Although symptoms differ across age groups, studies have consistently found that sexually abused children manifest significantly more symptoms of aggression, acting out, anxiety, depression, sexualized behavior, withdrawal, severe internalizing, low self-esteem, self-destructive behavior, and substance abuse (Beitchman, Zucker, Hood, DaCosta, & Akman, 1992; Davison & Marshall, 1996; Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993; Rohsenow, Corbett, & Devine, 1988; Staples & Dare, 1996; Widom & Ames, 1994; Wolfe & Jaffe, 1991).

The unique effects of physical and sexual abuse are difficult to isolate because they often co-occur with poverty, substance abuse, and witnessing violence. Children who witness family violence, generally aimed at the mother, may be developmentally impaired and suffer severe and specific stress-related disorders. Similar to the effects of other forms of abuse,

stress-related symptoms of witnessing violence are related to the severity and frequency of the traumatic events and the child's coping abilities and resources (Wolfe & Jaffe, 1991). Children of women battered by their husbands are more likely to imitate that violence as adults. Sons who witness such violence have a 1,000% greater rate of wife abuse than sons who do not witness domestic violence (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Daughters of battered wives are less likely to leave their own abusive husbands (Lerman, 1981).

Poor parenting and environments plagued by abuse and neglect tend to be recreated by adults "who were once its childhood victims" (Haney, 1995, p. 571). These cycles of violence and abuse—patterns of behavior passed down from generation to generation—are difficult to break (Dodge et al., 1990; McCord, 1991; Widom, 1989). This research focuses on exploring and understanding the background experiences of incarcerated mothers and their perceptions of the patterns of risk factors to which their own children have been exposed. By asking incarcerated women about their own histories and how they perceive the contexts and meanings of the crimes for which they are imprisoned, we may better understand the roots of female criminal behavior. By asking them about the circumstances under which their own children are being raised, we may gain an additional perspective on the cycles of crime in which they and their families may be inadvertently enmeshed.

METHOD

SAMPLE

Participants were a sample of 102 mothers incarcerated in three jails in central California: a small, local, county women's facility; a local transitional recovery home for addicted women serving jail sentences; and a large, urban women's correctional facility (a majority [86%] of the women were in the latter facility). In each case, the women were volunteers who came forward after the interviewer made a verbal announcement and request to groups of women, typically in the jail dormitories or living units. Respondents were asked if they were willing to be interviewed about a range of issues that were relevant to incarcerated mothers, and they were assured that their participation would not affect their current status or case and that the information they provided would be anonymous and confidential. It is possible that because of the manner of selecting the sample of respondents, we have overincluded respondents who were comfortable and even eager to talk about their plight and underincluded those who were not.

The sample was made up of 43% Latinas, 32% European Americans, 7% African Americans, 4% Native Americans, 2% Asian Americans, and 12% women of mixed ethnicity. There is a slight overrepresentation of Latinas (43% in the sample vs. 36% in the jail populations at these women's facilities) and an underrepresentation of African American women (7% in our sample vs. 21% in the jail populations). The women ranged in age from 18 to 50 years with an average of 32. Of the women, 44% were single and had never been married, 31% were separated or divorced, 22% were married, and 3% were widowed.

The women's education levels ranged from having completed some high school to having earned an advanced degree: 47% completed some high school, 34% completed high school or earned a general equivalency degree, 15% attended some college or had vocational training, 3% completed a 4-year college program and earned a bachelor's degree, and 1% earned an advanced degree. Of these women, 69% were serving time for a drug-related offense (including under the influence, possession, sales and probation violations for original drug charges), 23% were incarcerated for violating probation, and 15% either turned themselves in or were arrested for warrants.

The mothers had between one and eight children (average of 2.5 children). Seventy-one percent of the mothers lived with their children before they were arrested and expected to live with their children after serving their sentence. Of the mothers in this sample, 76% had legal custody of their children, and 24% shared joint custody with the children's fathers.

MEASURES

A structured interview format was followed in which a series of 160 questions were posed to respondents. In addition to quantitative coding, verbatim answers were recorded in writing at the time of the interview. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 1/2 hours and averaged 1 hour. Respondents provided sociodemographic information including source of income, level of education, marital status, father's education, and mother's education. To develop a family social history profile of the women, respondents answered questions about their childhood experiences of physical, sexual, and domestic abuse. They were also asked about their parents' and their own histories of drug use, addiction, and incarceration.

Information about the children of these incarcerated mothers was also collected. Interviewers selected the oldest child under 18 as the focus of subsequent questions. We based this selection rule on the assumption that the oldest child under 18 would have spent the longest time cohabiting with his or her mother, and his or her experiences would provide us with the broadest

database. Thus, we asked each mother a parallel set of questions about her child's experiences, similar to the ones she was asked about her own childhood. These included questions about experiences of physical and sexual abuse and witnessing drugs and domestic violence at home. Mothers were also asked about the number of homes in which their child had lived during the past 5 years as well as the father's presence and involvement in the child's life.

Mothers were asked open-ended questions about the following: their goals on release; what they worried about most with regard to their children; when and why they started using drugs; if their reasons changed as they continued to use drugs; if they thought there were specific experiences that directed their lives one way or another, and if so, what those experiences were.

RESULTS

REPORTED RISK FACTORS AND OTHER TRAUMA

Although we did not inquire directly about their family of origin's income (because of concerns about the reliability of the estimates), the education level of the inmates' parents suggests that economic deprivation may have been a common experience for many of the women we interviewed. Slightly less than one third of the respondents did not know the educational background of their parents, but more than 50% of those who knew reported that their mothers had not completed high school, and 40% reported the same about their fathers. In addition, some 86% of the women reported that they had received government aid at some point in their lives. For many of the women, the earlier patterns of economic instability continued into adulthood. Thus, 54% were receiving aid at the time they were arrested, and less than one half (44%) had paying jobs.

In addition, the incarcerated mothers' lives were characterized by another kind of instability that is both a cause and a consequence of economic marginality. The women reported that they had moved an average of seven times before they turned 18 years old. Some women told us they could not remember all the places they had lived and gave conservative estimates because they were "always" on the move—they counted only the homes they could remember but were sure they were forgetting some. One woman said, "We must have moved at least 20 times. My mother was married 6 times, and we never stayed any place for long enough to make friends."

Most of the mothers in the sample suffered traumatic, abusive experiences during their childhood. Fully 86% of these women had, as children, suffered either sexual or physical abuse or witnessed violence at home. When asked questions about how they were punished or disciplined as children, about two out of three of the incarcerated mothers (65%) had been subjected to physically abusive punishment. One woman gave this typical response: "My father used to hit us with a belt or a hanger. Mom would scratch or slap us." Others said the following: "[I was] hit, slapped and yelled at a lot, and my mother chased me with guns," "[I was] spanked with cords, shoes, you name it," and "I was beat with a belt, hit, dragged around the house."

Some women offered what they believed to be underlying reasons for the harsh punishment they received. One remembered,

I was mostly punished by my mother. One incident I can recall is when I was swung around by my hair and swung up against the wall. She took a coat hanger and hit my back with it. She always told me she wished she had had a boy and not a girl.

Another woman reported, "My mother really used to beat me, she just never had a close relationship with me." Some women referred to the abuse as deserved; as one explained, "My mother threw my brother's baby bottle at me and cut my eye open. My dad would hit us when we needed it but he didn't hit us for nothing. My mom, now she'd hit us [for no reason]."

A majority (60%) of the women remembered violence at home that scared them as children. Generally, their memories were of their parents' fighting and their mothers' being hit by either their fathers or their mothers' boy-friends. One woman told us, "My dad was always beating on my mom. Me and my brother used to hear him beating on her, and we'd be in the room crying. It was really hard." Another reported, "Once when my mom and dad got into a fight or something, we were in a foster home for about 2 weeks, and they separated my sisters and brothers and me. My dad used to beat her up."

More than one half of the incarcerated women (55%) were sexually abused, a rate double that of women in the general population (27%) (Finkelhor, 1986). Yet, few of them were able to discuss the traumatic experiences with a sympathetic other. In fact, about one third of the women who were sexually abused as children told us they had never talked to anyone about it. Some of the other women reported that when they did get the courage to tell their mothers, they were greeted with skepticism and disbelief. One woman said,

I told my mom that my stepfather was coming into my room at night, and my mom didn't believe me. She told me to stop telling stories and talking like that just 'cause I didn't like him. Then he killed himself.

Another woman remembered, "When I told my mom that my uncle touched my private parts with his, she slapped me and told me she didn't want to hear me talk like that ever again."

More than one half (54%) of the women were separated from their parents for an extended period of time during their childhoods. The most frequently reported reasons were running away; being put in juvenile hall, a group home, or a hospital; or one parent's leaving the family. One woman remembered, "I was taken to a shelter. My mom had nervous breakdowns a lot, and my father was in prison." Another said, "I was separated from my dad when they divorced. The only time I saw my dad was when he was coming to beat my mom up." And, one woman recounted, "I was made a ward of the court and removed from my mother's home at 15 because of the abuse. I went to school and my teacher noticed that I had been whipped. I lived in foster care."

Growing up in unpredictable, abusive, and unstable environments made these women more prone to running away from home and/or dropping out of school. Three out of five said they ran away from home as children. One woman remembered, "When I first ran away at 13, I felt unloved, and I just wanted to drown all my pain." Another woman told us she ran away at age 11 "to escape my family life." Some never went back, and more than one half ran away at least twice.

Several women believed the instability in their childhoods hindered them from finishing high school. One woman told us,

I don't know how to read and write because of problems between my mother and father. My dad used to drink a lot, and I knew one day I'd come home from school and my mother would be dead. I was afraid my father was gonna kill her, so I needed to stay home from school to protect her.

Another woman explained, "My father was an alcoholic and addict, and there was no stability at home. I maybe would have graduated if we didn't move around so much. If I didn't get hit, I wouldn't have run away."

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AS RISK FACTOR AND COPING MECHANISM

Drugs and alcohol were an ordinary part of these stressful, violent, and abusive environments. Many of the women remembered learning a seemingly straightforward lesson about how to ease the pain around them and

cope with stress and unhappiness. Nearly two thirds (62%) of the women recalled that their parents or the people with whom they lived were involved with drugs or alcohol; 43% of the women remembered seeing their mothers drunk or under the influence of drugs, and 55% remembered seeing their fathers drunk or under the influence of drugs. In fact, some women told us they were introduced to drugs and alcohol by their parents. One admitted, "My father started giving me beers when I was 12, and it was like if I didn't drink with them, I didn't fit into the family." Another woman explained, "My mom was giving me crank when I was 12. Mom was giving it to me so I figured it was okay."

If drugs and alcohol were not introduced at home, both were easily accessible in the neighborhoods where the women lived. The average age at which they started using drugs or alcohol was 16 years. One woman claimed that her drug use stemmed from "meeting the wrong people. I wasn't a bad kid, but because my mom was an alcoholic, I stayed away from home and met people who turned me onto drugs." The majority of these women turned to drugs because they were curious or felt pressure from a friend or boyfriend although, perhaps surprisingly, only 4% reported that they were introduced to drugs by a boyfriend.

The women reported that drugs were used by many of their friends, were easy to obtain, and helped to ease the pain they were feeling. One woman told us, "I wanted to have fun and didn't feel happy inside. Drugs made me feel happy and giddy and laugh. I laughed a lot." Another woman reported, "I used drugs to get rid of the pain that I was going through. I couldn't take it anymore, so I started using." Others talked about the lack of love they suffered. One mother told us, "I was confused with life; I didn't really care about life. I guess because I didn't have no love. I guess I used drugs to comfort me." Another said, "I used 'cause it felt good. I liked the way it felt. It felt like there was something inside of me that was empty, like a hole, and it filled it up. That's what it felt like." Some women sold drugs to help support their families. One mother told us, "I was a cocktail waitress at 25 working 6 days a week, 12 hours a day. I used to support us, and it kept me going. And when you're real poor, it can help you."

Of course, no matter what their age when they entered the drug culture, it was likely that the drug culture would complicate the women's lives, multiply their problems, and lead them, eventually, to more pain. In addition, because men largely controlled the distribution of drugs, the women's dependency on men increased once they had become addicted, and they were often placed in compromised positions where they ended up trading sex for drugs. One woman explained,

A female's place in the drug world and a man's place are two different things. Men have control; men are usually the dealers. When a woman needs drugs, he says, "Suck my dick for an hour" then often doesn't give her drugs, and she moves on to the next man.

Some women told us they stayed in abusive relationships with men primarily because the men controlled the drug supply. More than one half (58%) of the women admitted having been in physically abusive, sexual relationships in the past.

In the current climate of the war on drugs, involvement in the drug culture also placed these mothers at high risk of arrest. Fully 69% of the women whom we interviewed were serving sentences for drug-related offenses, 58% said they were addicted to drugs and/or alcohol at the time of their arrest, and 71% said they had at some time in the past been addicted to drugs or alcohol. Only 4% of the women reported addiction to alcohol only.

Typically, as a result of their drug use, these women eventually ended up in jail, separated from their children, adding more pain and trauma to their own lives as well as the lives of their children. Because there was little effective drug treatment provided in jail or on the streets, rates of recidivism were high. Almost four out of five of these mothers (79%) had served time in jail before, an average of four times. Thus, in most cases, the current incarceration was not the first time a mother's children had to deal with their mother's absence and the trauma and instability it brought. Many of the women talked about the impact their absence was having on their children. Several women worried that their children would not understand the situation and what was happening with their mother. One mother said, "I hope [my daughter] can understand I love her and I'm not gonna abandon her like she thinks is happening." Another worried, "I know [my son is] very angry and he's hurt. When I got arrested, he got mad 'cause he knows the chances of getting me back right away are gone." Several mothers declared that they did not think it was fair for their children to be going through what they themselves went through as children.

MOTHERS' REPORTS OF CHILDREN'S RISK FACTORS AND OTHER TRAUMA

For many of the mothers who had been living at the economic margins of society and were struggling with alcohol and drug use, the stresses of attempting to maintain a home and raise a family were frequently overwhelming. As we noted above, many of the mothers had themselves been raised under conditions in which their parents had been unable to protect

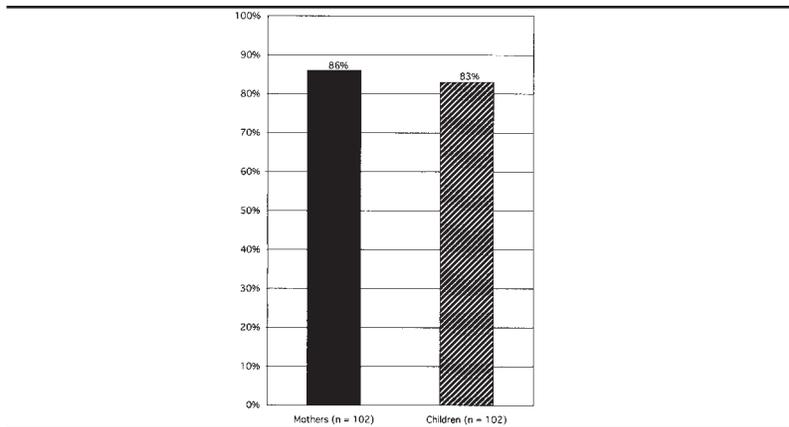


Figure 1: Total Childhood Risk Factors: Mothers and Children

them from exposure to damaging criminogenic risk factors. In the second part of our interviews, we inquired of the mothers whether their own problems were compromising the lives of their children as their parents' problems had compromised theirs (e.g., Wolfe & Jaffe, 1991).

Of the 102 children referred to in the interviews (recall that each mother answered only about her oldest child under the age of 18), 47% were girls and 53% were boys. Ranging from 4 months to 18 years, their average age was 10 years. Of the children, 24% lived with their fathers, and about one third had regular contact (one visit per week or more) with their fathers. However, almost one half (46%) did not see their fathers at all. The most frequently reported reasons for the father's absence were that he was in prison, had been in an abusive relationship with the mother, or just chose not to be involved. Typical of the comments in the latter category, women told us the following: "He just doesn't come around," he is "too into his own world," and "He chooses not to take the time to visit them."

To examine the possibility that common patterns or cycles of abuse and violence were being replicated in the lives of their children, we asked the mothers to describe their children's experiences. The parallels in their traumatic social histories were dramatic and disturbing. As illustrated in Figure 1, 83% of the mothers' children had been either sexually or physically abused or witnessed violence at home—almost identical to the frequency among the mothers themselves. The mothers reported knowledge of physical abuse in the case of almost one half (44%) of the children about whom we asked. This is somewhat less than, but comparable to, the number of mothers who reported being abused themselves. When asked how they punished their own

children, many immediately insisted, "I don't believe in hitting my children." They were asked if their child had ever been hit as punishment or for doing something bad; 44% said they had, and the majority of them reported that someone else had administered the physical punishment. One mother explained, "My ex-husband lost control sometimes and left bruises on my youngest son." Perhaps as might be expected—both because of the stigma attached and the fact that it often occurs without the mother's knowledge—there was a marked disparity in the percentages of sexual victimization reported by the mothers. Thus, according to these mothers' reports, only 9% of the 102 children had been sexually abused.

On the other hand, fully 70% of the mothers told us that their children had witnessed violence at home. Given that 58% of the women in this sample reported having been in a physically abusive relationship, it is likely that much of the violence that the children witnessed involved the mothers themselves. One mother told us, "I was in an abusive relationship with my son's father, and he doesn't like to see us fight. I don't want to have anything to do with him, I had to have him put in jail." Another woman who said that her son had seen violence at home a lot of the time told us,

Most of my marriages have been with violent people since I was 14. My son's father told me he's gonna kill my boyfriend. You don't know how many nights I've spent locked in my room with my three kids in my king-sized bed. He had an unregistered gun.

Several mothers talked about court-ordered restraining orders they had against their children's fathers because of abusive relationships.

More than one half of the mothers (55%) reported that their children had seen the people they lived with using drugs or alcohol, and 57% said their children had seen the mothers themselves drunk or under the influence of drugs. There was a fair amount of instability reported for the children as well: The mothers indicated that their children (whose average age was 10 years) had moved on average 3 times over the past 5-year period (with a range of 0 to 15 moves reported).

DISCUSSION

Consistent with findings of previous research on incarcerated mothers, results of this study show that the majority of these women come from families where criminogenic risk factors such as physical and/or sexual abuse, violence, and drugs were prevalent (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Snell, 1994). Short- and long-term attempts to cope with these

traumatic childhood experiences have been shown to vary (Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993; Widom, 1989), but for this sample—and arguably this population—substance abuse and addiction were common adaptations. The women in this study were candid about both the role of substance abuse in reducing the psychic pain in their lives and the damaging long-term consequences that led the majority of them to jail.

Studies of incarcerated women have linked their traumatic histories to a variety of psychological and psychiatric problems. For example, Jordan, Schlenger, Fairbank, and Caddell (1996) suggested that high rates of borderline personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, substance abuse, and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among women inmates were caused in part by their exposure to extreme, traumatic events in their past. Not unlike the women in the present study, the majority (78%) of the women in the Jordan et al. (1996) study had experienced a traumatic event, most commonly childhood physical and sexual assaults (61%).

Although there are a myriad of variables and reactions to such traumatic experiences, substance abuse and dependence are extremely common problems among women inmates and the most common reasons for their incarceration. Thus, Teplin, Abram, and McClelland (1996) found that more than 80% of a large sample of women jail detainees who were surveyed met the criteria for at least one psychiatric disorder and that the most common disorders were drug and/or alcohol abuse or dependence and PTSD. Substance abuse or dependence was the most prevalent and affected 70% of the sample. These findings are almost identical to those of the current study in which 71% of the women admitted substance abuse or dependence at some time in their pasts.

It is important to recognize that the method used in this study was subject to self-report bias. Of course, detailed family histories and information about patterns of physical, sexual, and/or domestic abuse and drugs and alcohol in the environments in which the mothers and their children were raised often can be uncovered only through self-report data like these. In addition, several factors suggested to us that self-report bias was not a serious problem in these interviews. Most of the mothers desperately wanted to be reunited with their children and had no incentive to exaggerate their own victimization. Moreover, they claimed they were good mothers and were determined to overcome the consequences of their traumatic experiences and eventually provide supportive homes for their children. In fact, it seems more plausible that they were underreporting trauma and risk factors, at least for their children, whose lives they had undertaken to safeguard and protect. Indeed, some of the mothers expressed shock and concern in the course of our interviews when they began to realize that they were describing patterns in the lives of their chil-

dren that very much resembled the trauma and turmoil that had characterized their own social histories.

To be sure, many of the mothers who were interviewed for this study were well aware of the connection between their childhood trauma and many of their adult problems. And, many certainly recognized the potentially damaging effects that the risk factors and traumas they had experienced could pose for their children. They expressed a desire to provide stable, nurturing homes for them, and they talked about wanting to “stay clean” and live a “normal” life so that their children could have the “healthy childhood [that] every child deserves.” Even though poverty, abuse, and drugs were common in their own lives, the mothers recognized the potential damage that exposure to such things could inflict on their children; they worried that their children would not be able to escape the cycles that had ensnared them. Many of the mothers voiced concerns about their children’s getting a good education, and some worried aloud about their daughters “getting pregnant at a young age like I did.” One woman told us, “I want a future for my kids so they don’t turn out like me.” Another complained, “I feel like my daughter is going through the same thing I did, and I didn’t think it was fair to me, and I don’t think it’s fair to her.”

The results of the present study suggest that the cycles of pain to which these incarcerated women were exposed are being replicated in the lives of their own children, despite the mothers’ expressed intentions to do better and to protect their children from the traumas the mothers endured. Thus, our self-report data provided unsettling confirmation of the cyclic, repetitive nature of exposure to childhood maltreatment and trauma. As illustrated in Figure 2, reported experiences of the children of the incarcerated women in this study suggest that many of the children had already been exposed to the kind of traumatic risk factors that pervaded their mothers’ own lives. The majority of the children had witnessed violence at home, and slightly less than one half had been physically abused.

In addition to exposure to these risk factors, separation from the mother as the primary caregiver as a result of her incarceration represented a separate form of trauma. The fact that 71% of the mothers were living with their children before their arrest and were now in jail was an emotionally painful stressor for mother and child alike. Because the majority of these mothers were the primary caretakers of their children, their own emotional stress and “their extended absence from the home, [*sic*] can contribute to the development of psychiatric disorders and behavior problems among their children” (Jordan et al., 1996, p. 513).

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the children’s exposure to risk factors such as familial instability, physical abuse, and exposure to violence and

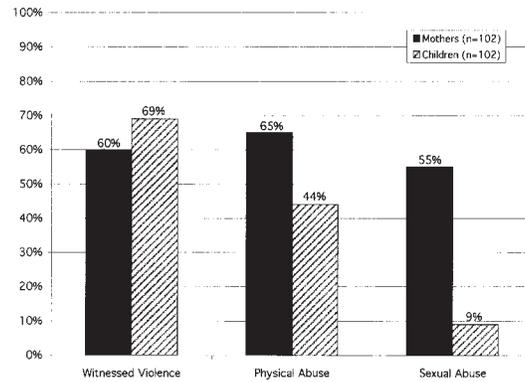


Figure 2: Risk Factors Experienced: Mothers and Children

drugs makes it more likely that they will follow adaptive patterns similar to their mothers', increasing the chances that they too will end up in jail. One mother emphatically explained,

The responsibility of a mother to her child is a big one. The family structure is the one thing that's torn apart in these institutions. You see children more likely to participate themselves because what this does is open up an area where they are taken from their parents. No one can love their children like the mother can. In order to escape, they'll try drugs and start hanging out with the wrong group because they are searching for acceptance. Many people are good mothers before they go in jail. . . . A child needs a mother.

Indeed, the mothers repeatedly told us that they wanted to be present and function as effective parents for their children, to stay away from drugs, and to avoid involvement with the same people with whom they associated before they were incarcerated. One woman declared, "My mother was a drug user, and I hated being taken away from my mother. I don't want to be away from my kids any longer. I don't want to make them suffer like I did." And, they very much wanted their children to have healthier, happier childhoods with more opportunities to escape the dependencies that dictated their own lives. Many mothers reiterated, "I don't want to see my child go through everything I went through." Moreover, because of the serious problems with and shortage of homes in the foster care system, these mothers are likely the most reliable and effective available resource for interrupting such cycles of poverty, abuse, drugs, and criminality.

Unfortunately, there was little evidence that they were being given the help that would enable them to translate these good intentions into practical realities. To break these cycles of pain and implement their plans for a better life for themselves and their children, these mothers need intensive counseling or therapeutic help to stay free of drugs and alcohol; assistance in getting jobs; access to affordable, clean, and sober homes; and other tools with which to create an emotionally and economically stable life. Typically, however, the women were released from jail with a criminal record, the clothes they came in with, and an appointment to report to their parole officers. Too often, the only people they know in the outside world are friends too eager to offer a "hit" to ease the pain. With no place else to go and no one to pull them in a different direction, the old cycles too often repeat themselves.

One important structural issue to be addressed in social programs designed to assist incarcerated women after they have been released is the poverty they almost inevitably will confront. We know that poverty can be a powerful determinant in the cognitive and behavioral development of children (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994). A common characteristic of exposure to poverty is the absence of any strong, ongoing, intimate relationships, which in turn impairs one's ability to establish trust and support in later years. Children may be forced to mature quickly, either fending for themselves at a young age or helping support and care for their family during critical developmental years when they are in desperate need of nurturing and consistent parenting themselves (Haney, 1995). Children may grow up lacking a sense of safety, security, and hope for their futures.

Poverty imposes stress on parents struggling to support a family—stress that is often expressed in frustration, despair, and depression. Poverty also functions as a precursor to abuse. McLoyd (1990) argues that poor parents experience relatively higher levels of stress and are more punitive toward their children than nonpoor parents, making poor children more likely to be physically abused. In a study of welfare recipients, Horowitz and Wolock (1981) found that more than one third of children from families living in the "most deprived material circumstances" experienced severe abuse compared with only one tenth of children from families living in less deprived material circumstances. There are competing theories about the comparative effects of persistent poverty versus "current" poverty (or sudden economic loss), but researchers agree that economic deprivation can predict and does increase severe and recurrent physical abuse (Kruttschnitt, McLeod, & Dornfeld, 1994). Thus, addressing the structural variable of poverty is critical not only because it is an important risk factor in its own right but also because of its connection to other criminogenic influences like child maltreatment, delinquency, and substance abuse. Although these factors are generally examined

individually, multiple factors may accumulate and interact to create a destructive pathway that leads from poverty to prison.

It is also important to recognize that as a group, the women interviewed for this study did not speak with a single voice, present an identical social-historical profile of risk factors and adaptations, or always acknowledge literally the same cyclical patterns of parenting. Hence, despite what we regard as remarkable commonalities, there is not simply one certain solution that will prove effective for the range of problems that emerged. Similarly, it is important not to assume that all (or even most) women who have been abused or witnessed violence are destined to become addicted to drugs or alcohol or to move repeatedly in and out of jail. However, identifying patterns in the lives of incarcerated women can help facilitate an understanding of how their behavior is a common response to the environments in which they were raised.

There is a dire need in the criminal justice system to recognize and respond to the unique needs of women. Childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, caretaker responsibilities, and women's varied reasons for drug addiction are still practically ignored. The problems and needs specific to women are underresearched and generally overlooked. "This neglect may stem from sexism and racism, from the fact that most criminologists are white men, or from the fact that female prisoners remain overshadowed by the vastly greater number of male prisoners" (McQuaide & Ehrenreich, 1998, p. 234).

Furthermore, it is important to focus not only on victimization but also to "identify women's agency in the midst of social constraint" (Stewart, 1994, p. 21) to develop various strategies to help them overcome and alter their social environments. Listening to and learning about the women's experiences can improve the services we offer to incarcerated mothers on their release and create alternatives to incarcerating addicted mothers. As a result, they may be better able to manage their own lives and the lives of their children, and actively control their relationships with the men in their lives. Mothers who gain control of their situations may take a more active and authoritative role in encouraging the men in their lives to share in parenting responsibilities and rewards.

The present research has concentrated on incarcerated mothers in recognition of the fact that they are typically the primary caretakers of their children. Although fathers may perform important parenting functions and play significant roles for their children, our research and that of others has shown that many fathers are simply absent in their children's lives both before and after the mother goes to jail. In a 1993 study by Bloom and Steinhart involving 866 children of incarcerated mothers, fathers fulfilled a primary caretaker

role for 17% of the children. These data and the interviews conducted with our respondents suggest that fathers may be significantly less involved in the lives of their children than incarcerated mothers. Still, the social and emotional contributions of fathers as coparents could represent potentially important parts of their children's lives.

Alternatives to incarceration, such as homes where mothers can live with their children while serving their sentences, offer opportunities for mothers to address their problems while learning to assimilate back into society. Such programs allow women to learn parenting skills while they are acting as parents, to take responsibility for maintaining a home, and to participate in treatment and educational and job training programs specific to their personal needs. Their children are spared the trauma of losing their mothers for months or years, and children and mothers leave better prepared for a more successful reentry to society.

Most incarcerated women have limited access to resources to help them make plans for their release before they are released. If each woman had an advocate assigned to her a few weeks before her release, she could begin to prepare for her release and arrange where she will live, how she will get there, and how she will reunite with her children. Advocates would work as links between the community and the women in jail to help them develop and carry out their plans for a new and "normal" life. Their plans almost always include living with and caring for their children, so helping the mothers achieve their goals would also help their children.

CONCLUSION

Despite the individualistic premise on which our criminal justice system is founded—that we are all autonomous beings who freely choose our behavior and are equally blameworthy for the consequences of our bad choices—the majority of these women had little control over their painful lives and the environments of poverty, abuse, and drugs to which they were exposed as children. By studying women's lives, we can learn about "the power of context in shaping the chances and choices of a life" (Franz, Cole, Crosby, & Stewart, 1994, p. 328). And, increased awareness about the impact of childhood victimization has the potential to help prevent the cycles of abuse from infecting the children of survivors.

Without any consistent support or treatment to help the mothers understand and overcome the pain they carry from their abusive childhoods, they struggle with current risk factors and life stressors (that often include drug addictions) while simultaneously trying to raise children and prevent them

from having to endure the same traumas that filled their own childhoods. They often fail to perform these multiple, demanding tasks. Unfortunately, as the results of this survey show, too many of their children had already experienced physical abuse, and the majority had witnessed violence, drug and/or alcohol use at home, and had seen their mothers drunk or under the influence of drugs. And, they will suffer continued separation from their incarcerated mothers.

We remain convinced that the mothers we interviewed need guidance, support, and resources to implement their plans and intentions to raise their children in more positive environments than they experienced and interrupt the cycles of poverty, abuse, violence, drugs, pain, and prison. These essential services and other alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent female offenders may help to prevent their children from becoming the next generation of inmates.

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