Gender Responsive Justice: Risk Factors and Resilience in Women Convicted of Violent Crime

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Women’s Pathways to Prison

“Pathways perspective provides a framework to understand women’s unique routes to criminal behavior. Pathways research focuses on girl’s and women’s life histories in an effort to understand the links between child and adult experiences and offending behaviors. We know that these routes are uniquely shaped by experiences related to race, class and gender.” (Salisbury & Voorhis, 2009)

As feminist researchers we are indebted to “Pathways” research pioneers Mary Gilfus, Kathleen Daly and Beth Richie.
Women are the fastest growing demographic group within U.S. state prisons.

Over 2.2 million people are incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails.

When numbers include women detained in jails and prisons, more than 200,000 women are now incarcerated in the U.S. (Walmsley, 2012).

Two thirds of the women in prison have minor children. (Sentencing Project, 2013)

Women convicted of violent crimes make up one third of female sentenced state prisoners.

From 1980 to 2010, the rate of women in prison has increased 1.5 times faster than the rate of
Effects of Women’s Imprisonment

Not only on the victims of these crimes, but also the children and communities left behind by these women.

The life circumstances of the women who are more likely to be imprisoned underscores the juncture of race, class, and gender oppressions in the social structures that contribute to women’s crime and punishment.

(Willison, 2012).
Previous research has identified adverse childhood and adult experiences identified as part of women’s “pathways” to prison but few studies include data that provides a rich description of specific pathways to violent offenses for women.

Scant research on women in prison for violent crime and how histories of Adverse experiences put women at risk for incarceration for a violent offense.

(Willison, 2012)
Current Study

Outgrowth of a quantitative study conducted by Judith S. Willison, Ph.D.

Results of analyses indicated independent effects of Adverse (Negative) Childhood Experiences and Gender Disadvantage significantly contributed to the risk of incarceration for violent offending.

This study examines the connection of women’s violent crimes and adverse life events and women’s resilience and competencies to avoid re-incarceration for a violent offense

(Willison, 2012)
Adverse Life Experiences

**Adverse Childhood Experiences**

- Sexual Abuse or Assault
- Physical Abuse or Assault
- Parent Abused Substances
- Parent/Guardian was Incarcerated
- Placement Outside Parental Home
- Juvenile Incarceration
- Childhood Poverty

**Adverse Adult Experiences**

- Victim of Sexual Abuse or Assault
- Victim of Physical Abuse or Assault
- Victim of Intimate Partner Violence
- Previous Suicide Attempts
- Mental Health Diagnosis/Treatment
- Primary Caretaker for Minor Children
Methodology: Mixed Methods Study:

- 15 Item survey (31 women)
- Individual semi-structured interviews (30 women).
- Participants Recruited through SPAN, Inc.
- Individuals Interviews Audio Recorded, from 30-90 minutes
- Interview Data Thematically Coded
- Coded Data Analyzed by NVivo9
- Survey data analyzed using Excel and SPSS
Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) promotes the empowerment of participants by engagement in all aspects of the research project.

For marginalized populations, such as women who have been incarcerated, this can be a significant avenue toward self-efficacy.

FPAR is consistent with social work values and offers a set of “participatory principles” that help to equalize power differentials between researchers and participants.

Provides opportunities for empowerment of the women who participate in the study.

(Frisby, et al., 2005; Reid, 2004; Reid, Tom.& Frisby, 2006)
As FPAR researchers we argue that the goal is not to eliminate power differences but rather to work in an authentic and thoughtful way to acknowledge and manage differences by engaging reflexively with research participants. Reflexivity is about reflecting on power—specifically, a researcher’s power to perceive, interpret, and communicate about others.

(Frisby, et al., 2005; Reid, 2004; Reid, Tom. & Frisby, 2006)
FPAR in Action

Participants are informed that study is grounded in FPAR.

Participants are asked to critique survey/interview instruments.

Participants encouraged to provide feedback during data analysis and manuscript preparation.

Participants are invited to co-present at regional conferences in order to advocate for women involved in the CJS.

(Frisby, et al., 2005; Reid, 2004; Reid, Tom.& Frisby, 2006)
Study Research Questions

- How do the participants understand and explain the connection between their adverse life experiences and their incarceration for a violent crime?

- Did cumulative effects of multiple adverse experiences influence the participant’s violent offending?

- What indicators of resilience do the participants identify in themselves?
Preliminary Results

Data suggest that the women in the study believe there is a relationship between certain adverse life experiences and their incarceration for a violent offense.

They describe a cumulative effect of multiple adverse experiences and that these compound experiences of violent victimization, drug addiction, intimate partner violence, and poverty and are strongly connected to their incarceration.
Average age: 41

88% were unemployed
Preliminary Survey Results

Average incarceration time: 3 years

RACE/ETHNICITY

- Black/African American: 48%
- Hispanic/Latino: 28%
- White: 14%
- Biracial: 10%

MOST RECENT VIOLENT OFFENSE

- Robbery: 72%
- Assault: 7%
- Homicide: 7%
- Other: 14%
Childhood Adverse Life Events

Childhood Adverse Life Events
- Parental Substance abuse
- Poverty
- Juvenile Detention
- Placed outside of parental home
- Guardian incarcerated
- Mother incarcerated
- Father incarcerated
- Sexual Abuse
- Physical abuse

Childhood adverse life events most significant to violent offense incarceration
- Parental Substance abuse
- Poverty
- Juvenile Detention
- Placed outside of parental home
- Guardian incarcerated
- Mother incarcerated
- Father incarcerated
- Sexual Abuse
- Physical abuse

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I am resourceful
I am persistent
I am able to ask others for help
I am smart
I understand myself
I am strong emotionally
I am a hard worker
I am a dedicated student
When I put my mind to something,…

What do you see as your strengths and capacities?

What Supports do you have in your life?

12 Step Program
Religious group/person
Caseworker
Therapist
Co-workers
Children
Family
Friends

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Childhood physical and sexual abuse
Trauma and addiction
Juvenile detention/court involvement
Learning violence
Use of violence to cope
Intimate partner violence
Illegal income efforts
Impact of incarceration
Importance of motherhood
Lack of job skills
Turning points—recovery

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“Because it gives you a distorted perspective between right and wrong. You’re thrown into these places where you are supposed to be safe and you’re not. You just have to survive by any means necessary...

“Childhood detention centers taught me a perverted sense of right and wrong”
And when you like have addiction in your life and you are not treating your mental health it goes hand in hand.

I learned how to repress my anger and emotions which lead to alcoholism and untreated depression- I believe my arrest and incarcerations was the end result of long term self-medicating and negative coping skills.
"I felt that I had nothing to live for, felt worthless from ex-boyfriends abusing me and telling me I was worth nothing, I tried to numb out everything with alcohol and drugs."

“My assault and battery charges on police officers stemmed not wanting to be touched or held down... abused from boyfriend and I am an violent drunk because I just didn't care about anything. I was a hurt person so I did what hurt people do. Use drugs and hurt themselves.”

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Importance of Motherhood

“I go with her (daughter) to her mental health appointments...and we even talk to these people about me being an addict, me not being in her life as a young girl as she was growing up, you know I sit in with her and I share ‘yeah, I wasn’t the best mother.’”

“...I have to be a positive power and example for my children and I have to be, you know, an active role model.”
“Now that I have the resources and the understanding of better and alternative ways of survival that are legal, I practice those methods.”

“I have learned to access support resources to improve myself and well being- I want this second chance at life to be the best it can be.”

“I want a better life for myself and children. I want to break the cycle. I also want to be of some help to other who have gone thru what I have been through.”
Summary of Preliminary Study Results

Preliminary findings support

- Women connect their adverse life events to their incarceration for violent crimes.
- Physical and sexual abuse as a child are seen as the beginning of pathways to incarceration for violent offense.
- Drugs use and intimate partner violence as an adult are seen as a pathways to incarceration for violent offense.
Implications of Findings

- These findings can inform social workers how to best serve formerly incarcerated women.
- Findings suggest that preventive services for impoverished women may be effective.
- Relationship between childhood trauma and adult substance abuse indicates need for early treatment services.
- Services for women in prison should include integrated trauma/substance abuse treatment.

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Implications for Forensic SW Practice

- Clinical practice
- Advocacy
- Policy work
- Research
- Teaching
Challenges/Limitations

- **Enacting FPAR:** Participants are still struggling with the realities of reentry, i.e. housing, employment, sobriety, mental health/health issues, caretaking.

- **Acknowledging and addressing power differentials and cultural divides through language, data collection and interpretation and dissemination.**

- **Sample may have been self-selected as older.**
- **Did not include women in prison currently.**
Discussion and Moving Forward

- Continue to analyze qualitative data
- Engage women in FPAR
  - Create support groups
  - Present at conferences
  - Involve in manuscript writing
  - Empower to advocate
References


References


