

Victimization, fear, and coping in prison

Doctoral Thesis, University of Manitoba¹

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As human beings, we are affected by our life experiences. Our reactions may be influenced by the way we perceive and approach the world around us, which may impact on our present and future experiences. From childhood on, we absorb information and respond to situations based on what we have learned in the past. Painful events challenge us and force us to gather our coping skills. At times, such events limit our available resources, or our perception of resources, and we may find ourselves in similar difficulty again. For example, some people who have had earlier abusive experiences could develop psychological symptoms, which may make them vulnerable to further abuse.⁴

Inmates tend to report significant painful and personal life experiences, more so than non-criminals. Specifically, inmates report more family related disruptive and abusive experiences. For many, these negative experiences have been associated with later criminal behaviour that may be a contributing factor towards conditional release failure. Research suggests that for many inmates, the prison setting itself magnifies the negative impact of earlier life experiences.⁵ In prison, vulnerable inmates are readily targeted and their coping skills and options are limited. When they enter a stressful prison environment, psychological symptoms from earlier traumas, such as intrusive memories, denial, and emotional numbing, return. This emotional response is thought to increase vulnerability to further violence, repeating a cycle of traumatic experience and response.

Fortunately, all people are not passive, and people do make active efforts to address and cope with problem situations and the emotions around them. Unfortunately, inmates and former inmates have generally been found to lack adequate coping skills in addressing their personal problems. Coping strategies typically identified among criminal populations include avoidance, momentary relief of problems with little thought to consequences, and aggressive behaviour. Such approaches, likely selected out of familiarity and past experience, tend to worsen problem situations. As unhealthy coping is continued, problems again worsen, and the pattern continues.

This article abstracted from the author's doctoral thesis outlines the research methodology sought to establish connections between certain earlier life events of inmates and their experiences within prison. The research was exploratory in nature. The goal of the project was to better identify inmates who may be vulnerable or problematic based on information obtainable on intake to the prison system, and to illustrate the cyclical nature of unhealthy coping skills among inmates. It was hoped that points of intervention could be identified.

Methodology

The sample for this study was drawn from Stony Mountain Institution and the Saskatchewan Penitentiary. Both are medium-security federal prisons, each housing several hundred inmates. Inmate participants were recruited through a mail-in request, as well as the recruitment of clients on individual caseloads of counselors and psychologists at Stony Mountain Institution. Inmates were also asked for permission to access their files for information regarding their institutional behaviour. In all, 91 inmates participated in the study, 53 from Stony Mountain Institution and 38 from Saskatchewan Penitentiary. Seventy participants allowed access to their files. Inmates completed consent forms and questionnaires in groups of approximately eight, supervised by Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) staff members to ensure privacy of responding.

Demographic information and earlier experiences

As part of the broader study, inmates were asked questions about numerous areas of their backgrounds, based on a questionnaire developed by Zamble and Porporino.⁶ These included items regarding demographics, parental loss, experiences with physical and sexual abuse in childhood, and information about siblings.

Victimization experiences in prison

Participants were asked about their experience with robbery, physical assault, sexual assault, and threats of violence during their period of incarceration.

Questions were worded in such a way as to distinguish between assaults and mutual fights. In particular, when asked about such incidents, respondents were asked to indicate who initiated the physical confrontation and whether they were able to defend themselves successfully.

Institutional behaviour

As part of a section on coping with the possibility of violence in prison, participants were asked about their use of anti-social coping strategies, specifically using drugs and alcohol, becoming aggressive first, carrying a weapon, and joining a gang. In order to gather further information about inmate behaviour, files were reviewed for information about institutional infractions.

Results

The sample

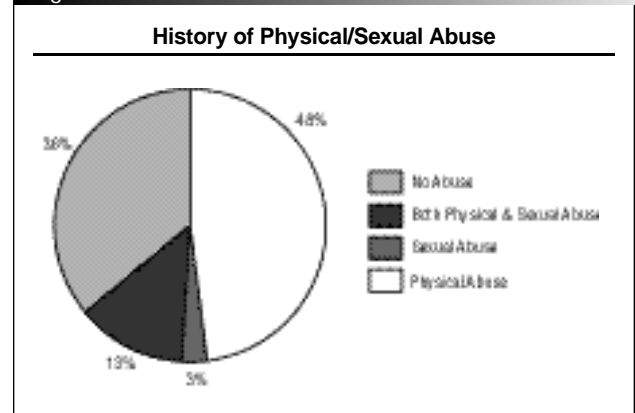
The sampled population used in this study was demographically similar to federally incarcerated men in Canada as a whole, with a mean age of 31.9 years and range of 18 – 68 years of age. Fifty-eight percent of the sample were of First Nations/Metis descent, and 38.6% Caucasian. Violent, non-sexual offences (such as, robbery and murder/manslaughter) accounted for over half (58.6%) of the primary offences of the sample, which was generally consistent with the broader population of incarcerated federal offenders. The 12.5% of sexual offenders in the present sample is a slight underrepresentation of the total population of sex offenders as only general prison population inmates participated in the study. Sex offenders who were placed in administrative segregation were not included in this study.

Earlier life experiences

With regards to family experiences, just over two-thirds of inmates (67.8%) reported that their mother had died when the inmate was at an average age of 25 years, with over one-third (37.2%) reporting the death of a father at an average age of 26 years. In particular, the rate of maternal death was considerably higher than that found in previous research. Having experienced the death of one parent was significantly correlated with the loss of the other ($r = .56, p < .001$). As such, within this relatively young sample, parental death appeared to be the norm rather than the exception. Most inmates reported having siblings (80% at least one brother and 84.5% at least one sister), with over one-third of sampled inmates having had at least one sibling incarcerated. Two of the participants indicated that they had 11 and 14 siblings that had been incarcerated.

The majority of respondents acknowledged abusive childhood experiences. Figure 1 shows that nearly two-thirds of participants (64%) reported being abused as a child, considerably higher than those reported in a file review of Canadian federal offenders.⁷ Of the sample, 16% reported sexually abusive experiences, generally consistent with that reported in the prison research, and double the rate in the community.⁸ Although retrospective, these data speak to the childhood experiences of loss and dysfunction which may create a context for the development of criminal behaviour.

Figure 1



Victimization experiences in prison

While incarcerated, the majority of inmates in the study indicated no personal experiences with victimization. One-third of the participants acknowledged having been threatened with assault in the last year, with one-fifth describing at least one experience with physical assault. Small subgroups of individuals acknowledged being repeatedly threatened (17.6%) or physically assaulted (9%) by other inmates. Results for sexual victimization are not reported given the very few affirmative responses to those items.

Negative institutional behaviour

With regards to negative institutional behaviour, over half (54.1%) of inmates had received some form of institutional charge, of which only a small proportion involved violence towards staff and other inmates (7.9%). This was consistent with the data extracted from the Offender Management System. Over half of the inmates indicated that they used drugs and/or alcohol to cope with the possibility of violence in their environment. A significant number of inmate participants admitted to carrying a weapon, being the aggressor, and joining a gang as their means of self-protection.

Correlational analysis

Earlier experience with parental loss and abuse did not significantly correlate with increased self-reported victimization in prison. However, family variables did correlate with later institutional behaviour. Having more brothers was significantly associated with more institutional charges in general ($r = .49$, $p < .001$), as well as institutional assault charges against staff ($r = .43$, $p < .001$). As the number of siblings who have been imprisoned increased, so did a number of other problems, such as institutional charges ($r = .54$, $p < .001$), as well as institutional assault charges against inmates ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and staff ($r = .73$, $p < .001$). There were no significant associations between family experiences and self-reported anti-social coping practices.

Summary and conclusions

Significant to the study sample are the high rates of parental loss and child abuse reported during earlier years. In community samples, early loss of a parent has been associated with later difficulties, including anxiety, desire to die, persistent guilt, compulsive self-reliance, and aggressive outbursts. One may suspect that the impact of parental loss would be compounded for individuals who have other risk factors for criminal behaviour (for example, existing behavioural problems).

It is worthwhile to note that within the sample population, those offenders emanating from highly criminalized dysfunctional families, tended to be more disruptive in prison as indicated by institutional charges, in particular, for assaultive behaviour. This finding likely reflects the prevalence of criminal/assaultive behaviour in general among those who have a social background characterized by the acceptance of crime. However, this significant correlation is somewhat remarkable given the host of other variables, which impact on behaviour. As such, family criminality may be one of the many valuable pieces of information for prison intake workers to

take into consideration when placing and monitoring inmates.

Participants in the study acknowledged engaging in a high rate of anti-social behaviours within prison. Perhaps it is no surprise that those who engage in anti-social behaviour in the community continue to do so in prison. However, it is telling that even in a controlled environment, which attempts to rehabilitate people, many individuals continue to struggle with their coping abilities. The social context of prison is likely important in this regard. In particular, inmates are faced with conflicting social rules and expectations. For example, inmates are expected to be loyal to one another, yet not trust each other. In this way, a "partially unstable system"⁹ is set up, always at risk for violence. Given the uncertainty of this social context, it is likely that inmates resort to familiar coping strategies. The specific impact of social expectations on inmate behaviour and coping would provide useful material for future research.

Inmates who reported abusive backgrounds did not appear to be at greater risk for victimization within prison. At least among the study sample, earlier experiences with abuse did not appear to be repeated in prison. Rather, it is likely that other factors, such as physical size, sex offender status, gang membership, and participation in the underground prison economy provide a greater influence on the likelihood of being victimized in prison. In addition, inmates who have been victimized have been known to respond with aggressive behaviour rather than increased vulnerability. Finally, in the present study it is possible that respondents downplayed their experiences with violence in prison, given self-image demands, fears of being identified as a victim in prison, and social pressures within prison not to "rat" on others. As such, it is important to take into consideration the context and the impact of a broad range of life experiences, and to appreciate individual differences in coping with victimization. ■

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