

Crime Victims' Institute

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**Experiences of Indirect Violent Victimization in Prison: Results from a Qualitative Reentry Study****Meghan A. Novisky, Ph.D.**

There are currently 1.2 million people incarcerated in prisons across the United States (Carson & Kluckow, 2023). Correctional agencies are responsible for maintaining safety and security in these institutions, but violent victimization remains a prominent and problematic public health issue. Prevalence rates of physical victimization among incarcerated people have been estimated at between 18 and 21 percent (Caravaca-Sánchez et al., 2023; Wolff et al., 2009). Relatedly, people who experience incarceration are at increased risk for head injuries, particularly due to assault (Durand et al., 2017; Perkes et al., 2011; Schneider et al., 2021). Three meta-analyses estimated lifetime prevalence rates of traumatic brain injury of 45 to 60 percent among incarcerated populations (Farrer & Hedges, 2011; Hunter et al., 2023; Shiroma et al., 2010). In 2018, 18,884 adult instances of sexual victimization were reported to correctional authorities, which was 2.5 times the 7,575 reported in 2012 (Maruschak & Buehler, 2021). Finally, from 2001 to 2019, the number of deaths of incarcerated persons due to homicide increased 267 percent (Carson, 2021). With 143 homicides reported in state prisons in 2019, this marked the highest number of homicides recorded across all 19 years of mortality data collection by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Carson, 2021).

While research on violent victimization in prison has been advancing, much remains unknown about the extent of violence witnessed by incarcerated populations, how violent incidents in prison are perceived by incarcerated individuals, and the impacts of witnessing violence in prison. Findings from this technical report help to address this critical gap by examining the violent victimization experiences of 38 men and women recently released from periods of state imprisonment, with a focus on their experiences with indirect (witnessed) victimization.

The Current Study

The research presented in this report is part of a larger study that addressed reentry challenges men and women

experienced following periods of state imprisonment. Results are based on data from qualitative interviews that were completed with 38 individuals who had recently been incarcerated in facilities throughout Ohio.

Participant Profile

Participants were obtained through convenience sampling methodologies via a partnership with a reentry organization in Northeast Ohio (hereafter referred to as the Center). The Center was selected as the research partner because of its regular contact with individuals making the transition between institutional and community supervision. The Center provides multiple free services to individuals attempting to overcome reentry barriers, including employment assistance, case management, parenting programs, addiction/recovery services, vouchers for vital documents, and a library.

Participants were recruited in person at the Center. Individuals who were eligible for recruitment were identified by staff at the Center and approached by one of two researchers (including the author of this report). The researcher then offered to explain more about the research and invited the individual to participate. To qualify, individuals had to have been released from a state prison within the prior twelve months and not be living at a halfway house or community-based correctional facility. Those who consented to participate completed one-on-one qualitative interviews with the researcher in a private room at the Center. Interviews were audio recorded, lasted an average of 54 minutes, and followed a conversational tone. However, all interviews were also structured with the use of an interview guide. Participants were compensated with a \$25 gift card for their time.

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the 38 participants. Most participants were men, Black, and currently seeking employment. Additionally, while all participants had been incarcerated in a state prison within the prior twelve months, the majority (60.5 percent) had

also been imprisoned at least once prior to the current incarceration period. At the time of data collection, participants were an average of 43.7 years of age and had been incarcerated for an average of 44 months (nearly four years) prior to their reentry.

Table 1. Select Respondent Characteristics^a

	n
Age	
(Mean; range)	42.9; 25 - 61
Gender	
Male	25
Female	13
Race	
Black	20
White	15
Biracial	2
Hispanic	1
Education	
11th grade or less	10
12th grade or GED	14
Some college or beyond	14
Employment	
Unemployed	30
Employed	8
Incarceration Length (months)	
(Mean; range)	46.2; 4 - 263
Prior Prison Term Served	
Yes	23
No	15

^aN = 38

Analysis

All interview audio files were transcribed by the research team verbatim. All identifying information (e.g., names, locations) was replaced with pseudonyms to protect interviewees' privacy. In addition to transcriptions derived from interview audio files, field notes were taken on-site and typed. Together, over 650 single-spaced pages of data serve as the source for this research. Data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative software. A sequential process of open (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) and refined coding (Loftland et al., 2006) was followed to identify thematic areas of interest in the data.

Results

Discussions of violence were central to participants' prison experiences and transitions back to the community.

Incidents of violence shared by participants took three forms. First, roughly one-third of the sample described incidents where they had perpetrated acts of violence on other individuals while they were incarcerated. These examples were often contextualized as necessary acts that were motivated by a desire to protect the self. Participants described the prison environment as "dangerous," "violent," and "extreme." One male participant summarized the environment as follows:

I have to pay attention when I take a shower. I got to watch all kinds of things so I don't get caught up. I don't run the same pattern all the time because people, they call it 'reading.' So if you're reading my movements, you can get me, K? ... I got to be above everything, I got to be so far ahead of everything. That's how bad it is in the penitentiary. It's just that bad.

A second form of violence described was direct victimization. Direct victimization included incidents that participants shared of violence that was perpetrated against themselves by another person. Thirty-one percent of respondents (n = 11) reported experiencing direct victimization. For example, one male participant disclosed being stabbed multiple times after he tried to change a television channel. Although he survived, he experienced multiple painful injuries and had a lengthy recovery period that included several serious medical complications. Another male participant described suffering from a continuous broken hand. He was involved in so many defensive fights, he never thought it worthwhile to pursue medical treatment. This participant explained that he knew the hand would only continue to break again during the next assault, so it was futile to pursue treatment. A female participant discussed being sexually assaulted by a staff member while held in solitary confinement. Another male respondent described being raped repeatedly by different men over a period of several years because of his conviction of a sex offense.

While accounts of direct victimization were shared by roughly one-third of the sample, the overwhelming majority of prison violence experiences shared by participants involved indirect victimization, which included incidents where participants had observed violence being inflicted on others. The entire sample – all 38 participants – reported witnessing the violent victimization of others while they were in prison. It was common for participants to recall not one, but multiple examples of indirect victimization. This finding is significant given that most research on prison violence

tends to focus on either the perpetration of violence or direct victimization rather than observed violence. For this reason, the remainder of the results focus on indirect victimization experiences. Three categories of indirect victimization are reviewed below: sexual assault, physical assault, and homicide.

Witnessing Sexual Assault

The least commonly witnessed form of violence disclosed by participants was sexual assault. Fifteen percent of the sample (n = 6) provided examples of times they had observed other incarcerated individuals being sexually assaulted. As explained by one male participant:

I happened to run into somebody on a fluke that was in the pod [housing unit], a little dude. He couldn't even go in his cell because he had dudes trying to corner him up so they could rape him.

He went on to describe these incidents as regular occurrences, particularly for individuals who “did not have protection arrangements.” However, participants pointed out that sexual violence was not only perpetrated by other incarcerated individuals. Staff were referenced as perpetrators of sexual violence as well. A female participant provided the following example:

I walked into the kitchen and he [staff member] had her down on the ground, his hand across her face...She was probably 90 pounds, very thin. He had a reputation for doing this kind of thing with the new arrivals.

Note that both accounts above share a common feature: the victims were described as physically small. Participants referenced other aspects that increased the perceived vulnerability of victims as well, such as mental health diagnoses, substance use/addiction, and age (older or younger). Thus, respondents had not only observed incidents of sexual violence, but had made observations about incarcerated individuals who they felt were at greater risk of victimization.

Witnessing Physical Assault

The most frequently witnessed form of violence reported by participants was physical assault. Ninety-five percent of the sample (n = 36) provided examples of times they had observed other incarcerated individuals being physically assaulted. Physical assaults described by participants underscore the violent nature of the prison environment emphasized by participants above. At times, physical assaults were motivated by a desire to defend oneself. Other times, however, participants described

physical assaults as merely an expected, routine aspect of incarceration that did not necessarily involve any sensational circumstances. One male participant stated:

People will fight over a soup. It's so petty down in prison 'cause it's all they got. So people fight over phones. People fight over...if you look at 'em too hard. Some people just wake up on the wrong side of the bed, fightin' to go.

In describing observed physical assaults, participants often concentrated on visual descriptions of the injuries that resulted from the assaults. One female participant stated, “There were black eyes, bloody noses, stuff like that...it was pretty bloody.” A male participant emphasized one incident where he observed someone attempt to assault another person but missed:

One guy missed the other guy. When he punched him, he hit a metal locker and his hand split wide open, you know?

Another respondent described an incident that involved a hospital transport. He noted that the attack was so disturbing that he continued to think about the details of the assault often. As explained by him:

The worst thing I saw was someone getting jumped. Bunch of dudes jumping this one kid, ya know? I don't know what he did. Rumors were going around about tobacco. He had to go to the ICU. He came out, had two black eyes, a cast.

While some participants perceived such events as disturbing, others had seemingly normalized the violence. For example, one participant – despite witnessing broken bones – could not recall observing any “substantial” injuries while incarcerated. In his words:

I've never seen no one get a substantial injury from conflict. But, I've seen guys with lumps and bruises, broken fingers here, broken wrists there from fightin'. But no serious injuries.

Weapons were referenced frequently by participants as facilitators of physical assaults. One male participant provided the following example:

I've seen stabbings, people getting hit on the head with locks. Fights with other objects that will literally open your entire body up...bricks, rocks, baseball bats...it's a violent world in there.

Recall of injuries was especially graphic when weapons were involved. Participants described broken jaws, legs, and arms, “eyes getting knocked out,” pools of blood, and lacerations deep enough to expose muscles and bones.

Witnessing Homicide

In addition to witnessing injuries sustained due to physical assaults, twenty-six percent of the sample (n = 10) had observed homicides of other incarcerated individuals. With the exception of one strangulation, the homicides that were described typically involved the use of weapons. Examples included handmade objects crafted from sharp materials like razors or glass (“shanks”), rocks, weights, and metal rods. One example of a witnessed homicide was described as follows:

The dude [victim] told on someone from another joint [prison]. He got touched [stabbed] while he was playing softball. He was batting and the catcher got him... It was horrible.

Examples of homicide were often contextualized as happening very quickly, and the result of injuries so severe that the victim died quickly without time to receive medical intervention. For example, individuals in the sample discussed lacerations to the throat and stomach. Others described head trauma so extreme that the victim’s face was no longer recognizable.

Discussion

Researchers have made advances in understanding and documenting violence in correctional settings in recent years. However, much of this work focuses on addressing either the perpetration of violence or direct victimization experiences. The findings presented in this report help to expand the research on prison violence by demonstrating that witnessing the violent victimization of others during periods of confinement is another important area of inquiry that should be prioritized. Individuals in the sample recalled violent victimization they had witnessed with significant detail. They also referenced these incidents as examples of events they were struggling to forget and move on from, despite no longer being incarcerated. Men and women in the sample observed sexual violence, severe injuries due to fights, and homicide. Exposure to these types of events is traumatic. Given the extensive histories of trauma incarcerated individuals tend to have prior to incarceration (Western, 2018), exposure to indirect violent victimization during incarceration likely further compounds pre-existing vulnerabilities of carceral populations. This is

problematic not only because correctional agencies have a responsibility to maintain humane conditions of confinement, but also because exposure to violence during incarceration is likely to contribute to a range of other social problems.

At the end of fiscal year 2022, 116,851 people were incarcerated in Texas prisons, and the state had an operating budget that exceeded 2.8 billion dollars to incarcerate that population (TDCJ, 2022). While the data in this report were not collected in Texas, the results should motivate research to explore the incidence and consequences of indirect violent victimization in Texas institutions for at least three reasons. First, the exportation of violence hypothesis argues that exposure to violence during incarceration “diffuses beyond prison walls” (Hummer & Ahlin, 2018). In short, prisons are not completely closed off or contained environments. Hundreds of thousands of individuals cycle in and out of prisons every year. By extension, those exposed to violent prison environments are at increased risk of bringing the culture of prison violence home and contributing to community violence. This makes communities less safe, less healthy, and elevates recidivism rates. Moreover, given the established link between stress and health deterioration (Pearlin, 1989), elevated risks for poorer physical and mental health outcomes among both prisoners and correctional staff who witness the types of violence detailed in this report are likely. Finally, witnessing others’ violent victimization has the potential to undermine attempts at establishing a rehabilitative climate, as exposure to more violent prison contexts increases risks for rule violations and violence (Johnson-Listwan et al., 2010, 2013; Steiner & Meade, 2016).

Several suggestions for policy are recommended. First, strategies for reducing incidents of prison violence are an important public health investment to pursue. The clearest path to reducing exposure to prison violence is to reduce the current overreliance on imprisonment as a crime control strategy. Given that overcrowding can elevate risks for prison violence (Colvin, 1992; Kurzfeld, 2017), efforts to maintain smaller correctional populations could help to prevent violence exposure among those who are incarcerated. Other avenues for reducing dehumanization in prison could also help to reduce violence in these facilities. For example, offering more diverse programming, expanding avenues for family contact and social support, and increasing the accessibility of the commissary. Those diverted away from prison via community supervision would also avoid witnessing prison violence. Second, established social impacts of

trauma exposure, including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and distrust should be anticipated as barriers to adjustment both during prison and reentry. Trauma-informed services should therefore be expanded in carceral settings before and after release (see Morrison et al., 2024). This would begin by acknowledging the prevalence and impact of trauma among those with carceral contact, and training among staff to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma (Levenson & Willis, 2019). Treatment approaches that are collaborative rather than confrontational can be especially helpful in enhancing motivation and avoiding re-traumatization (Stinson & Clark, 2017).

In summary, hundreds of thousands of U.S. adults cycle in and out of prisons each year. There is still much to learn about violence exposure in these spaces, but much research – including the findings of this report – indicates that violence reduction efforts are warranted. Correctional agencies have a responsibility to create and maintain safe spaces for supervision. Doing so is not only important for maintaining the credibility of the correctional system, but is essential for establishing a rehabilitative climate that effectively prepares individuals for reentry.

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