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Exposure to prison sexual assault among incarcerated Black men

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Introduction

Over 1.6 million individuals are currently imprisoned in the United States (Glaze, 2010). Black men in the U.S. are approximately eight times more likely to be incarcerated than White men (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Researchers predict that about 1 in every 3 Black men will experience incarceration at some point during his lifetime if current incarceration trends continue (Bonczar, 2003).

Prisons are notoriously violent places (Lahm, 2008; Wolff, Blitz, Shi, Siegel, & Bachman, 2007), and exposure to violence is associated with a variety of negative outcomes, including elevated levels of depression and psychological distress, and an increase in aggressive behavior, stimulating problems post-release (Boxer, Middlemass, & Delorenzo, 2009). Exposure to sexual violence in prison is the most commonly feared experience among inmates (Tewksbury, 1989), and is consequential regardless of whether prisoners are directly or indirectly exposed (Dumond, 2003). Due to the differences in methodology and sampling, varying conceptualizations of sexual assault, and limited access to prison populations, estimates of sexual assault prevalence rates vary widely (Gaes & Goldberg, 2004; Schneider et al., 2011).

Although prevalence rates vary widely, recent research suggests that male prison sexual assaults are rare, averaging a 1.5-2.1 percent prevalence rate (Beck, Harrison, Berzofsky, Caspar, & Krebs, 2010; Gaes & Goldberg, 2004; Wolff, Blitz, Shi, Bachman, & Siegel, 2006). However, these studies have largely overlooked indirect exposure to sexual violence, and in particular, the importance of witnessing and hearing prison sexual assault. Witnessing sexual assault can be traumatic for prisoners, generating fear among prisoners, contributing to psychological distress, institutional violence and suicide (Tewksbury, 1989). Without the documentation of such experiences, it is difficult to assess the overall impact and to develop

more comprehensive programs for prisoners at risk of exposure to sexual assault while incarcerated.

The larger male prison sexual assault literature presents mixed results on the extent to which incarcerated Black men are involved in prison sexual assault. While some studies report that Black men are disproportionately involved as sexual assault aggressors (Carroll, 1977; Davis, 1968; Hensley et al., 2003; Hensley et al., 2005; Knowles, 1999; Lockwood, 1980; Morash, Jeong, Bohmert, & Bush, 2012; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Toch, 1977), additional research has concluded that incarcerated Black men are also more likely to be sexually victimized (Jenness, Maxson, Matsuda, & Macy Sumner, 2007; Wolff, Shi, & Blitz, 2008). However, in a recent case study of substantiated cases of male prisoner sexual assault, more than half of the matched perpetrator-victim pairs included a Black perpetrator and non-black victim (Morash et al., 2012). In this study, Black men also had a 74 percent lower chance of becoming a nonpenetration victim. The research on associations between racial background and prison sexual assault is thus continuously evolving.

Research has shown that being exposed to sexual violence is generally linked to a multitude of negative health outcomes and behaviors, including HIV risk-related behaviors (Voisin, 2005) and negative long-term health outcomes (Herman, 1992), both of which affect Black male prisoners disproportionately (Braithwaite & Arriola, 2003; Tonry, 1995). However, very little is known regarding their exposure to sexual assault during incarceration. Similar to others, who describe traumatic stressors as those which are profoundly disturbing (Wheaton, 1994), we posit that witnessing violence is a type of traumatic stressor.

Although under-explored within the prison sexual violence literature, traumatic stressors have been established correlates of psychiatric disorders (Breslau, Chilcoat, Kessler & Davis, 1999). Even though exposure to sexual assault is linked to the aforementioned problems, to our knowledge, few studies have examined the extent to which Black male prisoners have indirectly encountered sexual assault (Banbury, 2004; Saum et al., 1995). For Black men, who are consistently at high risk for incarceration, a better understanding of the factors associated with sexual assault exposure can be useful in developing appropriate prison-based interventions and community reentry services. The purpose of this study was therefore twofold: to explore the extent to which incarcerated Black men are exposed to sexual assault; and to identify possible predictors of such exposure among incarcerated Black men.

Methodology

Setting

This study was conducted from April to August 2008 within one of the largest maximum-security male correctional institutions in the United States. This institution housed over 2,800 inmates. Sixty-eight percent of the inmates in this institution are Black, and twenty percent are White. The average minimum sentence of all inmates in this institution is eight years, and the average maximum sentence is 18 years. The average age of offenders is 38 years. Fifty-six percent of this population was convicted of committing Part I offenses, including murder, manslaughter, and aggravated assault; the remaining 44 percent are

incarcerated for committing Part II offenses, including statutory rape, probation violations, and drug-related offenses.

Participants

One hundred and thirty-four incarcerated Black men participated in this study. Black male prisoners were eligible if they were had been incarcerated within the facility for at least one year, and had achieved at least a 6th grade reading level. Prisoners segregated from the general prison population during recruitment were excluded from participating in this study, including those experiencing behavioral and serious medical problems.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Over 1,100 individuals, representing approximately 38 percent of the institution's total population and over half of the black men incarcerated at the institution, met the inclusion criteria. These 1,100 individuals comprised this study's sampling frame, and were identified via the Department of Corrections (DOC) database containing information on all prisoners in its custody. Participants were randomly selected from this sampling frame using the random number generator from the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS). One hundred and seventy-four participants were approached and asked to participate; 134 of the prisoners approached agreed to participate in the study, resulting in a 70 percent response rate, which is similar to other studies on sexual assault in male correctional settings (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000). Our sample size is comparable to other prison-based studies examining sexual behavior; these sample sizes range from 106 to 150 (Hensley et al. 2005; Maitland & Sluder, 1998; Saum et al., 1995).

The assistance of the research coordinator (RC) at the DOC was enlisted for recruitment. The research coordinator is a licensed psychologist who is trained to respond to crisis situations. It is also the RC's responsibility to protect the human rights of prisoners. He was the only employee within the DOC who had any involvement with the study. The RC delivered two recruitment letters, one describing the study and the other introducing the investigator, to the cellblocks of those randomly selected to participate. Prisoners who expressed interest in participating were given an appointment time and a pass to meet with the principal investigator during the next scheduled visit. Although the research coordinator was responsible for distributing the letters, he did not know which prisoners declined or chose to participate in the study.

Questionnaire Administration

Participants completed a self-administered survey during one-on-one sessions with the principal investigator in a private room located in the education wing, which is situated away from the cellblocks where inmates are housed. Participants were not compensated for participating in this study since such compensation is against the DOC's policy. Participants were informed that they would not receive compensation, including favor with the parole board, in exchange for participating in this study. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, participants read a non-signatory consent form and placed a checkmark at the end of the consent form to represent their agreement to participate in the study. All procedures were approved by university and DOC Institutional Review Boards, and the

Office for Human Research Protections. A certificate of confidentiality further protected participants' rights.

Measures

Exposure to Sexual Assault

To measure whether they had witnessed or heard sexual assaults occurring since they had been incarcerated in the current facility, participants were asked the following two questions: 1) "Since you have been incarcerated in this facility, have you heard another inmate being forced to have sexual contact?"; 2) "Since you have been incarcerated in this facility, have you ever seen another inmate being forced to have sexual contact?" Each question on direct and indirect involvement in sexual assault had a dichotomous response (yes/no).

Demographic Characteristics—Participants were asked their age, highest level of education completed, number of children (including biological and stepchildren), marital status, religion, and sexual orientation. Participants were also asked to provide information on their criminal history, including past and previous sentences received, offense(s) committed, and length of incarceration.

Data Analysis—SPSS version 17.0 was utilized for data storage and statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the distribution of each variable, and correlations were calculated to measure relationships between continuous background characteristics and sexual assault victimization. Chi-square statistics were estimated to test whether categorical demographic and criminal background characteristics were significantly associated with exposure to sexual assault (i.e. hearing or witnessing sexual assault while incarcerated). T-statistics were used to compare means of continuous variables for participants who reported sexual assault exposure versus those who did not report exposure to sexual assault.

Findings

The ages of the 134 participants in this study ranged from 23 to 74 years old ($M=42.13$, $SD=10.79$). The vast majority of the participants possessed at least a high school diploma or a Certificate of General Education Development (GED) (84%). The sample overwhelmingly self-identified as heterosexual (97%, $n=130$); three percent ($n=4$) reported they were bisexual. Most participants (80%, $n=107$) were unmarried. Participants' mean number of children was 2.37. Table 1 provides additional information on demographic characteristics.

Fifty percent ($n=67$) of all participants reported being previously incarcerated. Almost 18 percent ($n=24$) were on probation and 30 percent ($n=40$) were on parole when they were arrested for committing their current offense(s). The vast majority of the participants were currently incarcerated for committing at least one violent offense (69%, $n=93$); 22 percent ($n=30$) had committed property and drug offenses, and seven percent ($n=10$) were sex offenders. On average, participants had spent 13 years incarcerated, and were sentenced to 37 years (excluding life sentences).

Forty-three percent (n=57) of the sample reported hearing one or more of their fellow inmates being sexually assaulted, and 16 percent (n=21) reported they had witnessed a sexual assault while incarcerated. Witnessing sexual assault was associated with sexual orientation: fifty percent (n=2) of the self-identified bisexual participants in this study reportedly witnessed sexual assault ($\chi^2 = 3.7$, $df=1$, $p < .05$). There were slight differences between those who were exposed to sexual assault and those who were not, with a few exceptions. For instance, on average, participants who were exposed to sexual assault were older, received sentences that were six years longer, and had been incarcerated more than two years longer than participants who were not exposed to sexual assault (Table 1). There were no significant relationships between exposure to sexual assault and demographic characteristics such as age, education, marital status and number of children, prior incarceration and offense committed.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest that incarcerated Black men are involved in and exposed to prison sexual assault in various ways. Forty-three percent of the participants reported hearing sexual assaults occurring within the facility, and 16 percent directly witnessed them, suggesting that high proportions of incarcerated Black men may be exposed to sexual assault while incarcerated. The percentage of participants exposed to sexual assault was higher than in one of the few studies in this area, which reported that only 3 percent of the 106 study participants witnessed at least one sexual assault while incarcerated (Saum et al., 1995).

The findings also suggest that individual factors among incarcerated Black men, such as sexual minority status, may place them at an elevated risk for exposure to prison sexual assault. Although bisexual men comprised a small proportion of study participants, our results are consistent with several previous studies, which suggest that exposure to sexual victimization in correctional settings may be associated with sexual minority status (Beck et al., 2010; Dumond, 2000; Hensley et al., 2003; Saum et al., 1995).

Conventional sexual violence prevention and education programs may not be able to meet the needs of Black male prisoners who may have been exposed to sexually coercive behaviors. Prison-based sexual violence prevention programs should seek to address the unique needs of stigmatized and vulnerable populations who may be disproportionately exposed to sexual assault in this environment. However, further inquiry is needed in order to more thoroughly probe potential relationships between relevant personal characteristics and inmates' experiences with prison sexual assault. Assessing prisoners' vulnerability to sexual assault exposure is critical for developing more effective strategies to prevent such experiences from occurring. Reducing the physical and emotional burden experienced by those affected who witness sexual victimization might also reduce subsequent trauma and help stabilize prison environments.

Although the Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003 (PREA) has improved awareness of prison sexual assault, there are few procedures or systems in place for generating reliable estimates of indirect exposure to sexual assault in prison. Empirical studies such as this one

provide a meaningful portrait of incarcerated Black men's exposure to sexual assault. Providing correctional authorities with critical information about sexual assault in their institutions may assist them in developing targeted programs designed to meet the PREA goal of eliminating rape in correctional environments. It is especially important to implement policies expeditiously given the consequences associated with continued exposure to sexual assault.

Limitations

Although findings from this study have important practical and political implications, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, although the sample consists of randomly selected incarcerated Black men, these findings should not be generalized to Black men or men from other ethnic groups housed in other correctional facilities and environments. Second, given the sensitive nature of sexual violence in correctional institutions, underreporting or over reporting may have been a factor in the current study. Even though several precautions were taken to ensure privacy and confidentiality, participants may not have felt comfortable sharing their experiences with sexual assault with the researcher. Participants may have over reported their exposure in an attempt to portray their environment and/or experiences while incarcerated as more violent or uncomfortable. Prisoners who were exposed to sexual assault may also have been more likely to agree to participate in this research study. Unfortunately, validating data on prison sexual assault is challenging (Gaes & Goldberg, 2004; Jones & Pratt, 2008). Due to sample size constraints, we cautiously reported the statistically significant relationship between sexual assault exposure and sexual minority status. Though this finding is comparable to previous research in this area, larger-scale studies are needed to further explore this association.

In an effort to ensure anonymity and to promote honest reporting, participants in this study were allowed to complete their surveys in a private room with very little supervision. This is uncommon in studies conducted in correctional environments, but these steps were necessary to encourage honest reporting among participants. Despite the steps taken to assure participants that they would not be penalized for their responses, a lack of trust and fear of retaliation may have existed, and may also have discouraged others who have been exposed to sexual assault from participating. Despite these limitations, by documenting factors related to exposure to prison sexual assault among incarcerated Black men, this study makes a significant contribution to existing literature on exposure to sexual assault among male prisoners.

Implications

Prison administrators have global budgets that can allocate funds to address sexual assaults in a more meaningful and equitable manner. PREA resources should be used to provide treatment, support, and appropriate programming for the general prison population, regardless of whether they were directly victimized, given the high levels of exposure reported in this sample. Prisoners and prison officials may both benefit greatly from the expansion of effective programs designed to educate prisoners about consequences of sexual assault victimization, and about strategies for discretely reporting sexual assault in prison.

Enhancing reporting procedures for prisoners exposed to sexual assault may promote more regular reporting, perhaps ensuring that barriers protecting sexual assault aggressors can be weakened or removed. Empowering and encouraging those exposed to sexual violence to report offenses to correctional authorities can also improve healing after experiencing such a traumatic event, and might encourage the implementation of effective treatment programs for sexual assault victims and aggressors, in complete compliance with PREA guidelines. Studies such as this may serve to strengthen enforcement of mandates regarding prisoners' health and vulnerability to prison sexual assault exposure. However, more research in this area is needed in order to gain a deeper understanding of sexual assault victimization. For example, it may be illuminating to employ more direct and multidimensional measures of sexual assault, as well as whether exposure to sexual assault varies across race and sexual identity. Given the findings from this study, it is obvious that human rights violations are still common in U.S. prisons despite the PREA directive to eliminate such incidents.

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Table 1

Means, standard deviations, t statistics and chi square statistics for participants who were exposed to sexual assaults (n=59) and those who were not (n=75)

Exposure to Sexual Assault(s)						No Exposure to Sexual Assault(s)	
Variables	n(%)	Mean(SD)	n(%)	Mean(SD)	χ^2	t	
Demographics							
Age		43.1(10.1)		41.3(11.3)		1.07	
Marital Status					.15		
Married	11 (19)		16 (21)				
Not Married	48 (81)		59 (79)				
Education					.13		
GED/HS	49 (83)		64 (85)				
No GED/HS	10 (17)		11 (15)				
Criminal Background							
Previous Incarceration					1.48		
Yes	26 (44)		41 (55)				
No	33 (56)		34 (45)				
Length of Previous Incarceration (years)		3.1(6.0)		3.7(5.5)		.62	
On Probation and/or Parole					.46		
Yes	38 (64)		31 (41)				
No	21 (36)		44 (59)				
Current Offense					.63		
Violent	51 (86)		61 (81)				
Non-violent	8 (14)		14 (19)				
Current Sentence (years)		40.8(25.6)		34.9(25.1)		1.42	
Total Time Incarcerated (years)		14.5(10.2)		12.1(10.2)		1.26	