

## Victimization to Incarceration

By Maddie O'Brien

The incarcerated female population in the US is on the rise and most of the women have something in common leading them to prison: many are victims of physical and sexual abuse.

Women only make up about 9% of the US prison population and they are a minority group that is frequently overlooked. Unfortunately for many of the female incarcerated population in the US, their trauma stemming from physical and sexual abuse is what is driving them to imprisonment. Several research studies have been conducted to assess this correlation and many have found that in the US, this pattern is highly prevalent.

One of professor that has studied this pattern is Mary Ann Dutton, the vice chair of research in the psychiatry department at Georgetown University's medical center. Dutton has participated in research conducted around trauma, mental health and victimization in connection with crime engagement and found there to be a positive correlation.

"You know that people engage in these acting out behaviors that are the product of their own dysregulation that's can largely be fed by a very active victimization trauma history," says Dutton.

Stephen Tripodi, an associate professor in the college of social work at Florida State University agrees that there is a direct connection between trauma stemming from sexual and physical abuse and ending up behind bars.

Through his past studies focused on trauma histories of incarcerated women, Tripodi has found that women who were victims of sexual abuse were most likely to develop mental health problems and women who were victims of physical abuse were most likely to develop substance abuse disorders. Both mental health issues and substance abuse disorders can lead individuals to become more vulnerable to engaging in crime, thus leading to possible incarceration.

Additionally, Tripodi states that almost every incarcerated woman in the US has experienced some sort of trauma but about 50 to 70% have experience with physical and sexual abuse. Additionally, this issue affects the female incarcerated population more than the male incarcerated population.

"There's more intimate partner violence and sexual victimization within incarcerated women than there is with men," says Tripodi.

One woman who has suffered from this unfortunate pattern is Marianne Diaz.

Diaz is the senior director of the Watts Southern California Counseling Center and alongside being a victim of sexual abuse, she was also previously incarcerated.

Diaz avidly agrees with both Tripodi and Dutton that there is a strong correlation between past physical and sexual abuse, and incarceration of women.

“Sexual abuse is something that lives in you and it stays with you,” Diaz says

So clearly, the female incarcerated population in the US has a general background of trauma, but to truly understand whether they should be condemned to prison, it needs to be understood how exactly trauma from abuse can lead to incarceration. Dutton states that there are three main pathways.

According to Dutton, the first possible pathway is fighting back your abuser. Countless women have been incarcerated due to fighting back their abuser. Cyntoia Brown, Beatrice Taylor, and Piper Lewis are just a few names that have made it into the news. They all killed their abusers and were then sentenced to prison for manslaughter. There are also women that don't kill their abuser but simply fight back and are still sent to prison.

The second possible pathway is duress. Many women currently in prison were forced or threatened by their abuser to assist in carrying out a crime.

“You do it because your life is going to be threatened if you don't,” says Dutton.

The third pathway---and the most common---is associated with the negative mental health effects of trauma from physical and sexual abuse. The intense trauma stemming from abuse is severely detrimental. It has lasting negative effects on individuals that can cause them to make poor decisions which can eventually lead to engagement in crime.

“They become much more vulnerable to the forces that can lead somebody to engage in criminal activity,” says Dutton.

All three of the pathways Dutton mentions are not by choice of the woman being abused. The victim usually ends up in a life of crime due to attempting to protect themselves, being forced by their abuser, or simply suffering from mental health issues originating from abuse.

Furthermore, putting women who have been victims of physical and sexual abuse in prison only worsens the issue.

“One thing that happens with incarcerated women is that when they get to prison, the militaristic style of prisons often exacerbates their trauma,” says Tripodi.

Amarely Gutiérrez Oliver, the executive director at Reach---an organization that focuses on aiding victims of abuse and violence on the path to rehabilitation---agrees with Tripodi that prisons are harmful to women who have trauma from abuse.

“To remove them [the women who are victims of abuse] from a place of control to place them in another area of control [prison] isn’t going to help them thrive, it’ll just kind of manifest habits of crime in a different manner,” says Oliver.

So, if prison isn’t a viable solution, what is? How can we as a society aid women who are victims of physical and sexual abuse while also ensuring more crime isn’t committed?

Dutton, Tripodi, Diaz and Oliver all agree that the best solution is a combination of education and rehabilitation.

“I think that the majority of women in those situations need in depth rehabilitation, mental health counseling, substance use disorder programming...really being able to address these traumatic experiences that so many women have endured,” says Tripodi.

Despite the female incarcerated population growing, many organizations and programs have worked hard to help provide this rehabilitative support for incarcerated women who are victims of physical and sexual abuse.

“They are there to kind of help women navigate the world in a way that won’t have them reincarcerated or incarcerated in the first place,” says Diaz

The hope is that more and more people will realize the severity of this issue and help fight for education and rehabilitation instead of prison for women who are victims of abuse.

“It’s so layered,” Dutton says. “It’s not at all simple and yet we have to start simple.”