Pathways to Prison: Impact Victimization in the Lives of Incarcerated Women

Citation: DeHart (2008). Pathways to prison: Impact victimization in the lives of incarcerated women. Violence Against Women, 14, 12, 1362-1381.

Prepared by Meredith C. F. Powers
• Research indicates victimization is pervasive among delinquent girls & incarcerated women.

• Many quantitative studies lose sight of the personal realities of the women as they transform “the horrors experienced by women into something readable” (DeHart, 2008, p. 1364).

• There are few qualitative studies on the underlying dynamics that link victimization & crime.

• This research is needed to better understand the context & impact of incarcerated women's victimization.

(DeHart, 2008)
Research Aims

• Find out from the women’s own perspectives the context of their lives & circumstances that may have contributed to their incarceration

• Examine violence as a key factor in their life histories

• Look for potential insight into the motivations, responsibilities, and rehabilitative needs of female offenders

(DeHart, 2008)
Methods

• Open-ended interviews to explore life history including:
  - Family and relationship history
  - Physical and psychological victimization
  - Lifetime delinquency and crime
  - Interactions with social service and justice systems

• Sample:
  - 60 women from maximum-security state correctional facility
  - Random sample
  - 52% African American, 48% White
  - Age range: 18-70, average age: 31

• Grounded Theory Analysis on interview transcripts

(DeHart, 2008)
Findings: Emergent Themes

- Direct Impact of victimization on crime
- Indirect Impact of victimization on crime
- Cumulative Impact of victimization on crime
- Potential Pathways from victimization to crime

(DeHart, 2008)
Findings: Direct Impact

- Victimization appeared to be directly connected to some women’s delinquent or criminal activity, this included:
  - Child corruption
  - Perceived force
  - Provocation/pressure to commit the crime

(DeHart, 2008)
Findings: Direct Impact Examples

• Child Corruption:

A 42-year-old African American woman recalled that when she was a child, her mom would take the kids in the store and make them steal. She would cry, but her mom would make them put clothes on and walk out of the store. (DeHart, 2008, p.1365)
Findings: Direct Impact Examples (cont.)

• Perceived Forced:

Tanya’s boyfriend started wanting to rob banks. She didn’t want to, and he beat her up—said she was going to do it or he’d kill her. He had a drug habit now. So they ended up robbing banks, and that led up to Tanya serving time. (DeHart, 2008, p.1366)
Findings: Indirect Impact

For the women in this study, victimization indirectly impacted a variety of aspects in their lives:

- Physical or mental health
- Psychosocial functioning
- Private & public systems (i.e., family, work)

Many of these women experienced distrust or self-imposed isolation as a way of protecting themselves from further victimization or discovery of abuse

(DeHart, 2008)
Findings: Indirect Impact Examples

- Physical Injury:

  Brenda had seven knife wounds, massive battering, and injuries from the rape that were so bad she can no longer bear children. Her uterus is flipped backwards, her cervix was torn, and they don’t know what happened to her right ovary—they think she may have passed it as a clot. They believe that her husband raped her with an object while she was unconscious from his attack. (DeHart, 2008, p.1367)
Mental disorders, suicidality, and addiction:

Laura wasn’t an alcoholic until she was 15. She found out that if she was drunk, it was easier to deal with the sexual abuse. She would see her stepdad looking at her like he was going to do it, and she’d drink a half bottle of vodka. (DeHart, 2008, p.1368)
• Effects on School Systems:

*In ninth grade Laura failed English. There was all this homework, and at home Laura had more stuff to concentrate on than homework—she was worried about other stuff, like that she was pregnant by her stepdad.* (DeHart, 2008, p. 1372)
Findings: Cumulative Impact

• Most of the women suffered multiple traumas/victimizations (e.g., child abuse and neglect, adult relationship violence, sexual violence)

• The women in the sample experienced “unrelenting trauma” over their lifespans (DeHart, 2008, p.1375)

• This cumulative impact appeared to create ripple effects in many aspects in the women’s lives, causing overall disruption and pushing the women out of the mainstream

(DeHart, 2008)
Findings: Cumulative Impact Example

When Kelly was 14, after her mom was shot, she went to “Uncle” X’s house. He raped her and she got pregnant. Kelly’s mom was still in intensive care, so Kelly couldn’t tell her. Her dad’s mom was too ashamed to go with her to get the abortion—Kelly had lied and said it was just someone off the street who got her pregnant—so she had to go by herself. Kelly had wanted to keep her baby—it was twins—but she was so ashamed of who it was by. She thought people would think less of her and that it was her fault. With the shape her mother was in, Kelly didn’t want to bring any more pain on the family. Within a year, Kelly first tried marijuana, joined a gang, and began committing armed robberies of stores and motels. She began to regularly shoot up cocaine. (DeHart, 2008, p.1374)
Findings: Potential Pathways

• Some of these women’s pathways seem very straightforward, others are more complex or indirect.

• For some women, the cumulative impact of victimization may have been additionally complicated by other situations such as physical and mental health problems, impaired psychosocial functioning, and systemic marginalization.

(DeHart, 2008)
Findings: Potential Pathways

Examples

Child Corruption/Abuse
• Household abuse → run away → trade sex → addiction, prostitution

Partner Abuse
• Partner abuses family → implicated in abuse of children

Property Loss
• Abusive partner causes eviction → homelessness, criminal affiliates → prostitution, addiction

Sample Pathways From Crime to Victimization
• Drug use → raped or robbed due to intoxication or trying to obtain drugs

NOTE: abbreviated from Table 1 (DeHart, 2008, p. 1376)
The rape happened in the spring, a couple of days before Rachel burnt the house down. There was lots of stuff going on within her. After the rape, she had gone to a center to get help with the rape and with her drug problem. They told her that her insurance was not good enough to keep her there, but they could do outpatient. Rachel couldn’t drive because she didn’t have any insurance and no money for gas—she’d quit her job. She had gotten behind on her bills. Maybe setting the house on fire had to do with getting freedom from the payments. Maybe it had to do with being raped in that same place. Something just kept saying to her, “Burn it down.” (DeHart, 2008, p.1376)
Implications for Practice

- Most women in the study experienced multiple victimizations by multiple perpetrators over their lives. These experiences appeared to have resulted in “a tangle of barriers that the women faced in finding legitimate pathways in life” (DeHart, 2008, p. 1378)

- Many of these women were victimized, which resulted in their disconnection from normal support systems and may be linked to their criminal activity

- There is a need to recognize risks and help link girls and women to holistic approaches across the lifespan

- The lived realities of victimization that these women faced must inform practice and policymaking; especially for policy and state laws concerning those who entice young people into criminal behavior

(DeHart, 2008)