

Experiences of Interpersonal Violence and Criminal Legal Control: A Mixed Method Analysis

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Traci Schlesinger¹ and Jodie Michelle Lawston²

Abstract

Incarcerated women are substantially more likely to have experienced interpersonal violence than are women in the general population. Some scholars argue that increased likelihoods of committing crime among survivors of violence explain this association. However, previous research fails to control for measures of social vulnerability. Thus, the relationship between experiencing interpersonal violence and experiencing imprisonment may not be a causal one. To examine the links between social vulnerability, experiences of interpersonal violence, and experiences of incarceration, the authors analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. The authors' findings suggest that social vulnerability—especially being Black, having a parent who has been incarcerated, and being unemployed at the time of the arrest—does mediate the relationship between experiencing violence, using drugs, and believing that interpersonal violence contributed to one's imprisonment. However, even when controlling for social vulnerability, real effects of experiences of violence on both women's drug use and their understandings of the causes of their imprisonment remain.

Keywords

domestic violence, female inmates, intersections of race/class/gender, qualitative research, quantitative research, sexual assault, interpersonal violence

In the contemporary United States, more than 2.3 million people are incarcerated in prisons and jails (Bonczar, 2003) and more than 7 million people are under some form of correctional control: probation, jail, prison, or parole (Glaze, 2010). An estimated 4.5 million people have been imprisoned at some point in their life (Bonczar, 2003). Given this, it should come as no surprise that the United States incarcerates people at a higher rate than any other country in the world (Pew Center on the States, 2008). Although the scale of criminal legal control is daunting in itself, particularly troubling are the demographics of those who the state targets for confinement, with members of marginalized racial groups overrepresented in the prison, jail, and detention center systems (Bonczar, 2003). For women in particular—who constitute 7% of the United States prison population (West, Sabol, & Greenman, 2010)—race and class coalesce so that poor women of color are disproportionately represented in the criminal legal system. Close to 70% of incarcerated women are Black, Latina, First Nation, or Asian, and most are poor or working class (Diaz-Cotto, 2006; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; P. C. Johnson, 2003). Across the country, states are locking up an increasing number of migrant women in immigrant detention centers as well as in federal and state prisons (Escobar, 2010).

Given the rapidly escalating rates of women's imprisonment, research on incarcerated women has exploded. This

literature underscores not only that imprisoned women are racial minorities, poor, formally undereducated with unsteady job histories, and with mental and physical health problems (Ditton, 1999; Frost, Greene, & Pranis, 2008; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999) but also, of particular concern for the present study, that these women are substantially more likely to have experienced interpersonal violence than are women in the general population (Harlow, 1999). Even when looking only at women who have experienced violence, incarcerated women have experienced violence more often and in more forms than have other women (Raj et al., 2008).¹ One explanation for these associations is offered by scholars who argue that experiencing violence increases women's likelihoods of using drugs (Abram et al., 2007), engaging in sex work (Whitehouse-Yarnell, 2006), and participating in violence (Pollock, Mullings, & Crouch, 2006). Corroborating this, incarcerated women's narratives often portray their experiences of interpersonal violence as contributing to their

¹DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA

²California State University San Marcos, USA

Corresponding Author:

Jodie Michelle Lawston, Department of Women's Studies, California State University San Marcos, San Marcos, CA 92096-0001, USA
Email: jlawston@csusm.edu

engagement in criminal activity, which respondents often pronounce the cause of their incarceration (Acoca, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Gilfus, 1992; H. Johnson & Young, 2002; Richie, 1996).

However, what is largely missing from this literature is how social vulnerability, “the cumulative and interactive effects of those social factors that influence or shape the susceptibility of various groups to harm and that also govern their ability to respond” (Cutter, Boruff, & Shirley, 2003, p. 243), mediates these connections.² Social vulnerability remains relatively constant throughout people’s lives (Beller & Hout, 2006). Moreover, research shows that physical and sexual assaults are more common experiences for children and adults living below the poverty line (Drake & Pandey 1996) and that poor people are disproportionately incarcerated (Western, 2007). As such, it is possible that instead of interpersonal violence causing criminal legal contact, high levels of social vulnerability predict high likelihoods of experiencing both interpersonal violence and state violence, in the form of imprisonment.

To assess this possibility, this study uses a mixed method approach. The quantitative analysis allows us to control for possible mediating variables and produces greater generalizability, whereas the life history data give us a rich and complex picture of women’s own understandings of their experiences with imprisonment. We analyzed 170 surveys completed by women imprisoned in Florida and Illinois and 11 life history interviews of women formerly imprisoned in California to examine women’s understandings of the relationships between their experiences of interpersonal violence and their experiences with the criminal legal system.

We find that women who experienced physical violence and violence as adults are most likely to report using drugs to deal with trauma, whereas women who experienced sexual violence and violence as children are most likely to believe that their experiences of violence are related to why they are imprisoned. We are interested in this unexpected divide, which we believe suggests that encounters with psychiatric discourse shape women’s understandings of their incarceration. Contemporary psychiatric discourse present childhood sexual assault as a likely explanation for all negative life outcomes (Levine, 2002), and imprisoned women encounter this discourse both in one-on-one interactions with state-appointed therapists and prison social workers and through popular discourse distributed through channels such as movies, television, magazines, and newspapers. Such “victims’ discourses,” we argue, are naturalized for women in prison and work to shape, strengthen, and justify a gendered, racialized, and heteronormative carceral system.

Experiences of Violence, Crime, and Imprisonment

Among women in the general population, 43% have experienced either physical or sexual assault at some point in their life

(Walker et al., 1999). In contrast, studies that examine imprisoned women’s rates of experiencing violence, where “violence” includes both experiences of physical and sexual assaults, have found that 57% (Harlow, 1999), 60% (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999), or 75% (Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999) of respondents have histories of physical or sexual violence. Even the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ (BJS) conservative number suggests that imprisoned women are more likely to have experienced violence than are women in the general population.

These disparities remain when we examine experiences of physical and sexual assaults separately. Among women in the general population, 40% report experiencing physical abuse as children and 22% report experiencing violence from adult partners (Browne et al., 1999; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1996). In contrast, among incarcerated women in New York, 70% of respondents reported experiencing severe physical violence as children (Browne et al., 1999). Moreover, although studies have found that 20% to 27% of women in the general population report child sexual molestation (Browne et al., 1999; Finkelhor, 1994; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1996), between 31% and 48% of incarcerated women report childhood sexual abuse (Bloom, Chesney-Lind, & Owen, 1994; Cook, Smith, Tusher, & Raiford, 2005; Singer, Bussey, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995). Examining adult experiences of sexual assault, studies have found that 23% to 27% of incarcerated women (Bloom et al., 1994; Cook et al., 2005), as opposed to 17% of women in general population (Testa & Dermen, 1999), have experienced sexual assault as adults. These findings suggest that the proportion of imprisoned women who have experienced sexual and physical violence as children and as adults is significantly and substantially larger than the proportion of nonimprisoned women who have had these experiences (Browne et al., 1999; Chesney-Lind, 1988; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Raj et al., 2008; Richie, 1996).

One explanation for these associations is offered by scholars who find that experiencing violence increases women’s likelihoods of using drugs (Abram et al., 2007), engaging in sex work (Whitehouse-Yarnell, 2006), and participating in violence (Pollock et al., 2006). Wood, Foy, Goguen, Pynoos, and James (2002), for example, argue that early trauma and repeat victimization often shape girls’ delinquency. Crime—especially running away, using and selling illicit drugs, and engaging in sex work—is a survival technique among girls and women who have experienced violence (Acoca, 2004; Gilfus, 1992). This body of research generally argues that early experiences of violence lead women to engage in criminal behavior and thus increases their likelihood of going to prison. Summing up this literature, Acoca (2004) argues that violent victimization is “identified as a primary precursor to involvement in the juvenile and, for a growing number of young women, the adult criminal justice system” (p. 79).

Moreover, both incarcerated women and girls in the juvenile system cite abuse as a reason for their engagement in

criminal activity and for their incarceration (Acoca, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Gilfus, 1992; H. Johnson & Young, 2002; Richie, 1996). Acoca (2004) analyzes both quantitative data and structured interviews drawn from the National Council of Crime and Delinquency and found that girls in the juvenile system make connections between experiences of violence and illicit drug use, which girls reported numbed the pain of the violence they had endured. In addition, Gilfus (1992) analyzes 20 life history interviews with incarcerated women and found that respondents left home to escape sexual abuse and subsequently became involved in prostitution for economic survival. Gilfus's findings are corroborated by H. Johnson and Young (2002) who, through in-depth interviews with five incarcerated women, concluded that imprisoned women believe that their childhood experiences with abuse are related to their subsequent incarceration. Adding to this literature, Richie (1996) examines the narratives of 26 incarcerated Black women who were the survivors of partner violence and found that these women saw their paths to criminality as determined by an array of factors that included their experiences of abuse. The women in Richie's study understood their criminalized activities to be responses to violence or the threat of violence, especially in their intimate relationships. In this case, the respondents conceptualized their engagement in criminalized activity as resulting from intimate partner violence.

Research Questions

Although prior research finds that incarcerated women have higher rates of experiencing interpersonal violence than do women in the general population (Browne et al., 1999; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Harlow, 1999; Raj et al., 2008) and that incarcerated women often cite experiences of violence as causal factors leading to their imprisonment (Acoca, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Gilfus, 1992; H. Johnson & Young, 2002; Richie, 1996), these studies do not look at the differing effects of violence due to the *type* of violence and the *age* of the respondent when the violence occurred. Moreover, they do not examine the mediating role of *drug use*, even as they posit it as the action that connects interpersonal violence to incarceration, and they fail to control for *social vulnerability*, often due to incredibly small sample sizes. Thus, we build on prior research in three important ways. First, we disaggregate experiences of violence by *types of abuse* and *age*. Second, we examine *drug use* as a mediating behavior because it is the criminalized behavior most often found to result from experiences of violence and most often posited as a link between these experiences and imprisonment (Abram et al., 2007). Finally, we control for *social vulnerability*, "the cumulative and interactive effects of those social factors that influence or shape the susceptibility of various groups to harm and that also govern their ability to respond" (Cutter et al., 2003, p. 243), when examining each of the above connections.

This study asks the following research questions:

Research Question 1a: Do experiences of violence affect respondents' likelihoods of reporting feeling that violence contributed to their imprisonment?

Research Question 1b: Does the age at which the respondent experienced violence or the type of violence experienced affect this relationship?

Research Question 1c: Does women's level of childhood or adulthood social vulnerability mediate the relationships between experiences of violence and women's understandings?

Research Question 2a: Do experiences of violence affect respondents' likelihoods of reporting that they used drugs to deal with emotional pain?

Research Question 2b: Does the age at which the respondent experienced violence or the type of violence experienced affect this relationship?

Research Question 2c: Does women's level of childhood or adulthood social vulnerability mediate the relationships between experiences of violence and women's likelihoods of using drugs to deal with emotional pain?

A Case for Mixed Methods

Quantitative analysis offers several benefits to the social scientist. First, regression analysis allows the analyst to control for variables that may be related to both the independent variable of interest and the dependent variable and thus, may affect one's assessment of the relationship between the two. Second, when samples are representational, and ideally random, quantitative analysis allows the analyst to generalize from her results. Third, quantitative analyses are repeatable by other researchers; thus, researchers can confirm the validity of the results. Finally, significance measures take sample size (and variance) into consideration. This has the double benefit of stopping researchers from proclaiming that every relationship is meaningful while allowing researchers to proclaim that particular relationships are meaningful.

However, although survey data are important for control, generalizability, repeatability, and measures of significance, it cannot always capture the voices and perspectives of the population under study. Qualitative analysis of imprisoned women's life history interviews allows us to examine how these women make sense of the connections between the violence they experienced, their drug use, and their subsequent incarceration. It also gives these women, who are too often invisible within public discourses on imprisonment, a voice. As feminists have "cleared a space for less dominating and more relational modes" of research (Kohler-Riessman, 2000, p. 2), the use of life history data allows us to privilege the voices and positionality of women who have experienced incarceration.

We recognize that there are dangers inherent in relying solely on life history data. Academic research on the incarceration of women tends to “depict women in psychological and individual terms,” rendering the women and her “personal failings” (Sudbury, 2005, p. xvi) hypervisible. This obscures structural forces, such as deindustrialization (Garland, 2001) and the fall of Jim Crow (Beckett, 1997; Wacquant, 2001), which directly shape incarceration trends. “Ironically,” argues Sudbury (2005),

Feminist preferences for qualitative and hands-on research methods and interests in the personal and psychological realms tend to contribute toward this problem. Interviews with incarcerated women run the risk of simply replicating the discourse of individual responsibility and the language of correction that prisoners have learned as they are processed by the system. (p. xvi)

Although we agree with Sudbury’s (2005) concern, women’s interviews tend to focus on the personal rather than the structural, we are nonetheless committed to women’s right to tell their own stories. It is our hope that our mixed method approach allows women to speak for themselves while challenging reductions that obscure macrostructural forces.

Data and Analysis

Chicago Books to Women in Prison Collective (CBWP) Surveys

We mailed surveys to people imprisoned in state or federal women’s prisons in Florida and Illinois who requested books through the CBWP. We chose these two states because they are the states from which CBWP receives the most requests.³ Approximately 70% of people who received surveys filled them out and returned them with their next book request.⁴ Through the surveys, we collected information about the number of times a respondent has been imprisoned, what her present conviction is for, and what her perceptions are regarding the relationship between her experiences of violence and her incarceration (whether she feels that she used drugs to deal with her experiences of violence and whether she feels that her experiences of violence are connected to why she is in prison). In addition, we collected information about respondents’ experiences of violence (childhood sexual assault, childhood physical assault, adult sexual assault, adult physical assault, and forced or coerced sex work),⁵ childhood socioeconomic status (whether their family received means tested assistance and whether one of their parents was incarcerated), adult socioeconomic status (their highest level of education and their income and employment status at arrest), and other markers of social vulnerability (race, age, and number of children).

The sample includes 170 women who were imprisoned in Florida or Illinois; the demographics of the women in the sample closely mirror the universe of imprisoned women in all ways except one: White women are overrepresented. Of the women in the sample, 71% are White ($n = 119$), 17% are Black ($n = 29$), and the remaining 12% are spread between Latina ($n = 8$), Asian ($n = 6$), and First Nation ($n = 6$).⁶ The mean age of the respondents is 40, and 60% of our respondents are aged between 25 and 44 years; nationwide, 67% of women incarcerated in state or federal prisons are aged between 25 and 44 years (Harlow, 1999). In the CBWP sample, 87% of the women have children of any age; nationwide, two thirds of imprisoned women have at least one child younger than 18 years (Mumola, 2000). A total of 21% of the women in the CBWP sample report that one or both of their parents was incarcerated; nationwide, about half of imprisoned women report that an immediate family member had also served time (Mumola, 2000).⁷ With the exception of the overrepresentation of White women, the CBWP sample mirrors BJS national data, reported in the Harlow and Mumola documents, relatively well. The small discrepancies are all in the direction that one would predict when looking at the difference in the phrasing of the questions across surveys. For example, a larger proportion of women have children of any age than have minor children. This suggests that our sample does in fact reflect the universe of imprisoned women described in the BJS data and gives us more confidence in the generalizability of our findings.

We used both ordinary least squares and logistic regression models to analyze the effects of experiencing violence on three different subjective outcomes: whether the respondent reports (a) taking drugs to deal with emotional pain, (b) that drug use contributed to her imprisonment, or (c) that her experience of violence contributed to her imprisonment. We control for childhood and adult social vulnerability in all models to test the hypothesis that the connection between experiencing interpersonal violence and imprisonment is spurious. In addition, these analyses allowed us to examine whether drug use plays the mediating role anticipated by the current literature (Abram et al., 2007; Harlow, 1999).

We ran each of these models 3 times, with violence specified in three different ways. First, we ran the models with violence specified as a one to five scale that records how many types of violence the respondent experienced. As the study asked women whether they had experienced five different kinds of violence—childhood sexual assault, childhood physical assault, adult sexual assault, adult physical assault, and coerced or forced sex work—this variable ranges from one to five.

Next, we ran the models with violence specified in an alternate set of two discreet variables, physical violence and sexual violence. For these analyses, we counted women who reported experiencing physical violence while either as a child or as an adult as experiencing physical violence.

Similarly, we counted women who reported either experiencing sexual assault while either as a child or as an adult, or having been forced or coerced to engage in sex work as having experienced sexual violence. Looking at the effects of physical and sexual violence separately is important because the literature suggests that long-term effects of trauma are primarily limited to the effects of sexual assaults (Acoca, 2004; Gilfus, 1992; H. Johnson & Young, 2002).

Finally, we ran the models with violence specified in a different set of discreet variables, adult violence and childhood violence. For these analyses, we counted women who reported experiencing physical or sexual violence as children as experiencing childhood violence and women who reported experiencing physical or sexual assault as adults, or having been forced or coerced to engage in sex work, as having experienced adult violence. This analysis allows us to look at the distinct effects of childhood versus adulthood experiences of violence and to test the hypothesis, as suggested by current research, that violence that occurs during childhood is more likely than violence experienced in adulthood to be associated with negative life outcomes (Acoca, 2004; Gilfus, 1992; Wood et al., 2002).

RECOVER Interviews

The qualitative data consist of 11 life history interviews with formerly incarcerated women, conducted from December 2007 to May 2008. Respondents were part of a residential recovery program, referred to here as "RECOVER," that works with women, after their release from prison, on issues of substance abuse. Their entry into the program was court mandated; only women who had served time in prison for drug-related convictions were eligible for the program, whereas women who served time for other crimes were not given the opportunity to join RECOVER.

There were 21 women in the program at the time of study. These women entered RECOVER as a condition of their parole. Residents generally remained in the program for 6 to 9 months and went through both individual and group counseling. They also participated in a 12-step program like alcoholics anonymous or narcotics anonymous and were subject to mandatory drug testing. In addition, RECOVER expected residents to cook, clean, find employment, and remain sober at all times. If drug tests revealed that a resident had used drugs or alcohol, RECOVER staff would notify her parole officer who, potentially, could send the resident back to prison.

After receiving human subjects' approval and approval from RECOVER to interview willing participants, we made two presentations to the women in the program. In these presentations, we explained that we were interested in interviewing women in RECOVER about their life histories and experiences with and understandings of their imprisonment. Specifically, we explained that we were interested in hearing

about their lives and the experiences that they think led to their incarceration.

A total of 11 women signed up for interviews. Of these women, 5 were Black, 3 were Latina, and 3 were White. They ranged in age, from mid-20s to late 40s. All 11 women had spent time in prison, with convictions ranging from drugs to assault. With the exception of 1 Black woman who grew up middle class and attended college, respondents grew up poor or working class and had not attended college. A total of 4 women had not finished high school.

Each respondent who chose to be interviewed signed an informed consent form before the interview began. We interviewed respondents at the recovery center in a private room where only the researcher and respondent were present. Interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hr. We asked respondents to talk about their life histories. Interviewers asked respondents the following questions: What was their childhood and adolescence like? What has their adulthood been like? What events led to their incarceration and entrance into RECOVER? and What were their experiences with imprisonment? When respondents indicated having experienced physical or sexual violence, we asked how that violence may have influenced the course of their lives and how they make sense of it in relation to their incarceration. When respondents brought up personal drug use, we asked whether they saw a relationship between that drug use and the violence they endured or their incarceration. Interviews were tape recorded and immediately transcribed. We have changed the names of all respondents to respect their privacy and do not use any identifying information as to the actual name or site of the residential recovery program.

We used the program Atlas.ti to code and analyze all interviews. We coded when women mentioned experiencing physical violence, sexual violence, or both. For all of the women who reported having experienced one or both of these forms of trauma, we gave secondary codes reflecting the ages at which each of the forms of abuse occurred: childhood, adulthood, or both. We then gave a third level of codes to indicate when women had expressed experiencing social vulnerability, such as living in poverty. This allowed us to gauge how prevalent violence was in these women's lives, to determine how many women were socially or economically marginalized, and to gain an understanding of how women make sense of the ways in which forms of social vulnerability, such as poverty, influence their lives.

We also coded our outcomes: drug use and beliefs about incarceration. We coded when women talked about using drugs to deal with physical and/or sexual violence and used a separate code when women talked about drug use as contributing to their incarceration. We coded when women talked about physical violence, sexual violence, or both as contributing to their incarceration.

Limitations

One key limitation of both samples is a bias toward English language literacy because only women who can read, and overwhelmingly women who read in English, order books from CBWP and only women would could speak and understand English could participate in the life history interviews. It is possible that women who are not literate, or are literate in another language, have different rates of experiencing interpersonal violence or that they have different understandings of the connections between their experiences of violence and their incarceration. We are unable to examine these differences. It is likely that only including women who are literate in English puts an artificial floor on our social vulnerability variables. However, a good deal of variance in each of these measures remains. As such, this “floor” does not affect the validity of our findings. However, it does mean that our findings are only generalizable to incarcerated women who are literate in English.

A second limitation of the data is that neither sample includes transwomen.⁸ Transwomen make up an increasing portion of the prison population and experience high levels of violence, both prior to and during incarceration (Heidenreich, 2011; Sudbury, 2011). Prisons organize people according to the gender listed on their birth certificate.⁹ As such, states house transwomen in men’s institutions where they experience a great deal of violence from both other prisoners and staff (Heidenreich, 2011). Because the qualitative data asked for volunteers for interviews, the data reported here only include those who volunteered to be interviewed, and none of the respondents identified as transwomen. As we distributed the surveys for the quantitative analysis in women’s prisons, while states house transwomen in men’s prisons, no transwomen are included in the quantitative sample. However, transmen may be included in the quantitative sample. We invited all people housed in a women’s prison in Florida or Illinois who ordered books from CBWP to take the survey. As correctional policy is generally to house people based on the gender they were assigned at birth, the sample may include transmen and other gender-queer or gender nonconforming people. However, we asked no questions as to the respondent’s gender and, thus, are unable to examine whether transmen’s experiences of violence, drug use, and incarceration differ from those of women. It is important that future research center transgender, gender-queer, and other gender nonconforming people to more fully expose the ways in which prisons, as gendered institutions, uphold and reinforce the gender binary (Sudbury, 2011)

A Note on the Researcher’s Positionalities

Both of us are feminist researchers committed to antiviolence, antiprison, and prisoner support work. We have been engaged in prisoner support work for more than 10 years, in

the form of resource provision, parole letters, facilitation of writing workshops, the creation of “Prisoner Awareness Month,” and more. For the purpose of full disclosure, one of us volunteers with CBWP, one of us acts as the president of a nonprofit that provides support for women prisoners, and we regularly visit women prisoners in their places of confinement. Community connections from our ongoing prisoner support work facilitated both our entry into RECOVER and our ability to send surveys to people incarcerated in women’s prisons in Florida and Illinois. We are committed to a world without prisons, and it is our hope that this article brings us a step closer to understanding how interpersonal violence and social vulnerability combine to channel racially and economically marginalized women into the state-sanctioned violence of the prison system.

Interpersonal Violence and Criminal Legal Control

CBWP Findings

In Table 1, we report whether the number of types of violence (Model 1), the type of violence (Model 2), or the age at which respondents experienced violence (Model 3) is associated with respondents’ beliefs that their experiences of violence contributed to their imprisonment. Looking across models, we find that each increase in the number of kinds of violence women experience more than doubles their likelihood of reporting that they believe their experiences of violence are related to why they are in prison (Model 1). Moreover, women who experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives are 6 times more likely than those who have not (Model 2) and women who experienced violence while they were children are 13 times more likely than those who did not (Model 3) to state that their experiences of violence are related to why they are in prison. Taken together, the results from these models offer strong corroboration to previous qualitative findings that women believe that their experiences of violence are, at least in part, responsible for their imprisonment. Moreover, the results confirm that sexual assaults and childhood experiences of violence are most likely to be part of women’s self-understandings of the causes of their incarceration. Interestingly, neither childhood nor adulthood experiences of social vulnerability are associated with respondent’s likelihood of reporting that they believe that their experiences of violence contributed to the imprisonment.

RECOVER Findings

Of the 11 women, 7 women we interviewed in RECOVER experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives. Of these women, 4 experienced child sexual violence and 3 experienced sexual violence in both childhood and adulthood. Each of these women believed that these experiences

Table 1. Do Experiences of Violence Affect Respondents' Likelihoods of Reporting Feeling That Violence Contributed to Their Imprisonment?

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Experiences of violence			
Extensiveness	2.36*** (.58)		
Physical		Dropped (0 predicts failure)	
Sexual		6.25** (4.68)	
Childhood			12.79*** (9.74)
Adulthood			3.38 (2.46)
Childhood social vulnerability			
Welfare	0.78 (0.59)	1.21 (0.88)	0.53 (0.41)
Parent(s) incarcerated	0.78 (0.59)	4.05 (3.13)	6.04 (4.74)
Adult social vulnerability			
Less than high school	1.71 (1.51)	1.32 (1.28)	1.47 (1.27)
High school	0.24 (0.30)	0.22 (0.22)	0.32 (0.31)
Not employed at arrest	3.57 (2.46)	4.37 (3.29)	3.73 (2.69)
Income less than US\$7,000	0.52 (0.51)	0.56 (0.54)	0.62 (0.57)
Income US\$7,000 to US\$13,000	1.02 (0.99)	0.68 (0.67)	0.76 (0.74)
Income US\$13,000 to US\$22,000	0.65 (0.58)	0.32 (0.30)	0.67 (0.63)
Black	0.49 (0.36)	0.50 (0.40)	1.15 (0.86)
Number of kids	1.05 (0.18)	1.09 (0.19)	1.11 (0.19)
Pseudo R ²	.27	.19	.31
Number of observation	91	75	91

Note: We gathered data for this table through surveys given to clients of Chicago Books to Women in Prison who were imprisoned in state facilities in Florida and Illinois during 2008. In addition to all variables listed in the table, we also controlled for age and age-squared.

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

contributed to their imprisonment. Suzie, a Black woman who experienced child and adult sexual violence, provides the following assessment:

Violence was my life. I mean, that was all I knew in my life, it happened all the time. I was sexually abused when I was a kid, by my uncle, and this just continued, you know, into my adulthood. The men I was around always thought they could get what they wanted from me when they wanted it. If I had known better—if I had support, man, even resources, to deal with the sex abuse things would have been different. I wouldn't have ended up in prison and here [in RECOVER] now.

Like many women who have experienced incarceration, Suzie experienced poverty, an important indicator of social vulnerability, and sexual violence in both childhood and adulthood. She believes that her experiences with sexual violence are related to why she went to prison and is currently in RECOVER. Yet Suzie goes further and analyzes her social and economic position as also related to her incarceration; interestingly, Suzie was one of the few women interviewed who implied that if she had possessed social and economic capital, she would either not have experienced sexual violence and would not have been sent to prison, or would have had the support systems to work through the emotional trauma that comes along with having experienced sexual

assault, and would not have been sent to prison. Suzie therefore made important connections between social and economic marginalization and incarceration.

Alicia, a Latina, experienced sexual violence both as a child and as an adult. She states the following:

I talk to many of the women here about this, and what I hear again and again is how much sexual abuse happens. I was molested when I was a kid, repeatedly, and I guess it just became a part of life for me. I couldn't get away from it when I was a kid and had so much going on inside of me about it. I was really fearful, and would lash out a lot because I had no idea what else to do or how to release the pain. I was also sexually assaulted when I got older, and at that point a lot of what I felt was numbness. I felt nothing after a while and also did feel powerless, you know? This all really damaged me and got me to where I am today in the system.

Alicia, like many of the women we interviewed, reports that over time, the sexual violence she experienced became naturalized. For so many women in the criminal legal system, who lived both with social and economic marginalization and with interpersonal violence, abuse seems par for the course. Nevertheless, these women still report feeling emotionally and psychologically shaped by that violence. Interestingly, instead of making connections between violence, social and

economic marginalization, and incarceration, as Suzie began to do, the rest of the women interviewed who had experienced sexual violence believed that the “emotional scars” that resulted from sexual abuse channeled them into criminalized activities—because they did not know how to cope with abuse—and then, imprisonment. For many of our respondents, sexual violence seemed to seal their fate.

Five of our respondents reported experiencing childhood physical and sexual abuse. Consistent with the quantitative results, women who experienced violence as children reported that those experiences contributed to their incarceration. Cece, a Black woman who was physically and sexually abused as a child, makes connections between childhood violence and her imprisonment:

Both of my parents were alcoholics and they got into hard drugs, especially my dad. Dad was violent, he'd hit mom, they'd fight all of the time. He hit me too, I never knew when he'd beat me but he would. My grandfather sexually abused me, but it was all as if it never happened. My family didn't deal with it. As I got older I could function less and less, and I didn't know how to deal with my life. All of this just sent me on a path to prison and now here. I've been really damaged by all this.

Similarly, Lizzie, a Latina, also experienced childhood sexual and physical violence. Lizzie shares the following:

My family was never doing good. I mean, we didn't have money and really my parents were worried about bills all the time. I was abused by my dad, who was physically abusive. The sexual abuse as I mentioned earlier was by a guy in the neighborhood but I never told anyone until years later. I didn't know who to tell and my dad was already abusive so why go there with him? I didn't think he'd care about what happened to me with this other guy. But I got real closed off with people in my life, started getting into things I shouldn't have gotten into. I didn't know how to deal with the issues in my life in a positive way. I got into things I shouldn't have—stealing, lots of other things—and ended up in jail and prison a few times, now here.

Cece and Lizzie feel that their experiences of childhood physical and sexual violence explain their incarceration. However, both were socially vulnerable: they had poor families, few resources, and Lizzie didn't finish high school. They did not have the social or economic capital that would have helped them to cope with their experiences of violence. Rather than analyzing their incarceration as resulting from a structurally inequitable society that fails to provide resources or support to the most vulnerable women, Alicia, Cece, and Lizzie all indicated that they blamed themselves for their incarceration because they did not “know how to release the

pain,” “didn't know how to deal with it,” or “didn't know how to deal with issues in [their lives] in a positive way.” Such statements of self-blame are consistent with larger social and political discourses that blame one's incarceration on individual pathology or moral failing.

Suzie, Alicia, Cece, and Lizzie and the other women of color interviewed, experienced what Beth Richie (1996) terms gender entrapment, in which

gender, race/ethnicity, and violence can intersect to create a subtle, yet profoundly effective system of organizing women's behavior into patterns that leave women vulnerable to private and public subordination, to violence in their intimate relationships and, in turn, to participate in illegal activities. (p. 4)

Having few or no options because of their marginalized socioeconomic positions, entrenched racial inequality, and repeated episodes of violence, respondents indicated that criminalized activities became survival mechanisms, which led to incarceration. Although women of color have the added burden of racial inequality, it is important to underscore that the life history data of both White women, who also occupied marginalized socioeconomic positions, and women of color indicate that respondents see strong connections between the violence they experienced, their incarceration, and even time at RECOVER, especially when that violence is sexual in nature. The lack of resources and social support systems, coupled with structural racial, socioeconomic, and gender inequality, contributed to both women of color and White women's engagement in criminalized behaviors in an effort to survive and move forward with their lives.

Mediating Role of Drug Use

CBWP Findings

Each of the three models in Table 2 look at the effects of experiencing violence, specified first as “number of types of violence,” next as physical and sexual violence, and finally as childhood and adulthood violence on women's likelihoods of reporting that they used drugs to deal with emotional pain that resulted from their experiences of violence. We find that each increase in the number of kinds of violence the women in the sample have experienced doubles their likelihood of reporting that they have used drugs to deal with emotional pain at some point during their lives (Model 1). This means that women who have experienced all five kinds of violence are more than 5 times as likely to report having used drugs to deal with emotional pain than are those who experienced none of these events. Similarly, women who have experienced physical violence and violence as adults are 20 times (Model 2) and 4 times (Model 3) more likely, respectively, to report using drugs to deal with emotional pain than are those who have not. These

Table 2. Do Experiences of Violence Affect Respondents' Likelihoods of Reporting Using Drugs To Deal With Emotional Pain?

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Experiences of violence			
Extensiveness	2.10** (0.55)		
Physical		19.79** (20.38)	
Sexual		1.07 (0.78)	
Childhood			3.23 (2.37)
Adulthood			3.98* (2.93)
Childhood social vulnerability			
Welfare	0.87 (0.87)	1.83 (1.67)	0.97 (1.05)
Parent(s) incarcerated	9.25 (11.42)	14.31* (17.81)	13.55* (17.89)
Adult social vulnerability			
Less than high school	1.95 (1.84)	1.56 (1.52)	1.68 (1.53)
High school	3.74 (3.87)	4.80 (5.32)	3.94 (4.12)
Not employed at arrest	5.03* (3.85)	4.97* (4.14)	4.46* (3.42)
Income less than US\$7,000	1.78 (1.97)	1.79 (2.16)	2.30 (2.42)
Income US\$7,000 to US\$13,000	0.95 (1.05)	0.57 (0.67)	0.84 (0.93)
Income US\$13,000 to US\$22,000	3.67 (3.58)	1.94 (1.91)	2.75 (2.63)
Black	0.15* (0.13)	0.21 (0.18)	0.23 (0.19)
Number of kids	0.78 (0.17)	0.76 (0.17)	0.82 (0.17)
Pseudo R ²	.37	.41	.36
Number of observation	107	107	107

Note: We gathered data for this table through surveys given to clients of Chicago Books to Women in Prison who were imprisoned in state facilities in Florida and Illinois during 2008. In addition to all variables listed in the table, we also controlled for age and age-squared.

findings are noteworthy in light of prior research that suggests that drug use is a primary mechanism through which experiences of violence lead to increased likelihoods of imprisonment (Abram et al., 2007; Harlow, 1999; Simmons, 2000).

Looking at the associations between social vulnerability and women's likelihood of reporting using drugs to deal with emotional pain resulting from trauma, people whose parents were incarcerated and people who were not employed at the time of their arrest are more likely to report using illicit drugs to deal with emotional pain than are those who did not have a parent who was incarcerated or were employed at the time of their arrest. To be more specific, people whose parent(s) were currently or previously incarcerated were 14 times more likely to report using drugs to deal with emotional pain than those whose parent(s) were never incarcerated (Models 2 and 3). Similarly, people who did not have jobs at the time of their arrest were between 4 and 5 times more likely to report that they had used drugs to deal with emotional pain than were those who were employed at the time of their arrest (Models 1, 2, and 3). This suggests that people with fewer social and economic resources are most likely to suffer these effects of experiencing violence. It is not surprising that women with more resources are less likely to have their experiences of violence be linked to needing to use drugs to deal with the trauma as they are the most likely to have other forms of support available to them.

Surprisingly, Black women are 85% less likely than are non-Black women to report using drugs to deal with emotional pain (Model 1). Thus, although increased social vulnerability when measured through having a parent who has incarcerated or not having a job at the time of one's arrest is associated with an increased likelihood of reporting using drugs to deal with emotional pain related to trauma, increased social vulnerability as measured through Blackness has an inverse association with this outcome. Future research should first corroborate the race finding because it is only significant in one of our models and, if the finding is again discovered, examine Black women's methods of coping with emotional pain related to trauma in hopes of uncovering alternative methods of coping that may be used by some Black women.

RECOVER Findings

All of the women interviewed reported having a drug-use problem. Approximately 74% of women in all state and federal prisons used drugs regularly prior to incarceration (Mumola, 2000). Nonetheless, the ubiquitous nature of drug use among respondents in the qualitative sample makes sense given that RECOVER was geared toward working with women on issues of drug and alcohol addiction. Respondents were extremely open about their drug use and, in six cases, began to talk about these issues at the beginning

of the interview, making regular reference to “getting high” before their imprisonment.

Our quantitative analyses indicate that women who experienced adult physical violence were *more likely* than women who experienced sexual violence or violence as children to report using drugs to deal with emotional pain. Corroborating this, among women interviewed, those who experienced physical violence as adults were the most likely to talk about using drugs to cope with trauma. Four of the women who experienced physical violence as adults reported that they used drugs to deal with the emotional trauma of the violence; women who only experienced sexual violence as children were less likely to report using drugs to cope with emotional pain. The women who experienced adult physical violence strongly and repeatedly underscored their drug abuse in their interviews.

A White woman named Jill explained that she was a survivor of domestic violence. On her drug use, she states the following:

I got into relationships with really bad guys. I was in two separate relationships where the abuse was bad. I mean, I was hit on many occasions so bad that I couldn't remember the beatings at times. I started using [drugs] just to forget about what was happening to me. I had no where else to turn. After a while I would steal money from people just to support my habit.

A Black woman named Sandra also experienced adult physical violence at the hands of several male partners. Sandra states,

I got into this relationship with a guy that hit me a lot, for things he said I did wrong. After that I got into a few other relationships where the guys would hit me, but I always felt like I deserved it. The drugs just made it go away. They made me forget the pain. I guess you could say that they became my most intimate confidant.

Sandra and Jill both report that they took drugs in response to the physical violence that they experienced in their adult relationships. Drugs helped them to cope with the emotional pain that they experienced because of physical violence. As Richie (1996) finds in her study of battered Black women, drug use appeared as a response to violence, not “prior to the onset of abuse” (p. 150).

Drug use, which is the largest source of growth for the women's prison population, is a common theme in the lives of incarcerated women (Harlow, 1999; Owen, 1998; Pollock et al., 2006; Richie, 1996). Moe (2006) argues that drug use is, in many ways, inextricably connected to women's efforts to survive trauma. The interviews analyzed here indicate that the women who are “caught up” in the criminal legal system use drugs to deal with the psychological effects of violence.

This often led to other modes of criminality to support their addiction, with women like Jill reporting that they began to steal to support their habit. This was a no-win situation for them: Women used drugs to cover up the physical and psychological pain they were in and then became engaged in other criminalized activities to support their drug use. As Moe notes, “[d]ue to poor educational attainment, work experiences, previous criminal records, and/or their own addictions, legitimate means of support were unavailable” (p. 349). The physical violence that women experienced, then, shaped their future decisions, experiences, and perceptions.

Conclusion

Prior research argues that experiencing violence increases women's likelihoods of going to prison by increasing their likelihood to use drugs (Abram et al., 2007), engage in sex work (Whitehouse-Yarnell, 2006), and to be violent (Pollock et al., 2006). Corroborating this argument, the narratives of women who have experienced incarceration often highlight their experiences of interpersonal violence as contributing to their engagement in criminal activity and their incarceration (Acoca, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Gilfus, 1992; H. Johnson & Young, 2002; Richie, 1996). However, due to the limitations imposed by data and methodology—such as small sample sizes and reliance on qualitative data—these studies have been unable to examine the effects of the type of violence, the age at which violence occurred, or social vulnerability. This study moves us beyond that impasse by using a mixed methods approach to examine two different data sets from three states collected during 2007 and 2008. The study has three main findings.

First, experiencing violence matters. The qualitative and quantitative data indicate that the violence in imprisoned women's lives is pervasive. In looking more closely at the quantitative data, each type of violence experienced doubles imprisoned women's likelihood of reporting using drugs to deal with emotional pain and of reporting that their experiences of violence are related to why they are in prison.

Second, the type of violence matters. Women who have experienced incarceration and who are survivors of physical abuse, especially those who experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner, report that drug use “numbed out the pain” of the physical violence and helped them to cope with difficult life situations. They rarely had social or economic resources that they could turn to or use to address and escape physical abuse, and used drugs as a way to avoid the physical and emotional pain of severe and repeated episodes of violence. In contrast, women who experienced sexual violence are more likely to believe that their experiences of violence are related to why they are or were imprisoned. Women's life history data indicate that women who experienced incarceration believe that their experiences of violence led them to become involved with criminalized activities and

that their involvement in these activities, in turn, resulted in their incarceration. Our quantitative findings corroborate the qualitative results. Experiences of violence that are physical are more often associated with using drugs to deal with the pain of trauma, an important mechanism that supposedly links the experience of trauma to increased risks of incarceration, than are experiences of violence that are sexual. Third, the age of the respondent at the time of the experience matters. In taking a closer look at the quantitative and qualitative data, experiences of violence that occur when the respondent is an adult are most often associated with using drugs to deal with the pain of trauma than are experiences of violence that occur when the respondent is a child.

Moreover, social vulnerability mediates all of these effects. The majority of the women in the interview sample had few or no options because of their marginalized socioeconomic positions, gender, entrenched racial inequality, and repeated episodes of violence. As the quantitative data show, having had one or both of your parents be incarcerated and not being employed at the time of your arrest are consistently significant across models that examine the relationships between experiences of violence and using drugs to deal with trauma. This suggests that women with more resources are more likely to find other ways of coping with their experiences of violence, and thus, the presumed link between experiencing violence and experiencing incarceration is in fact only true among the most vulnerable. However, no marker of social vulnerability affects whether or not women *believe* that their experiences of violence contributed to why they are imprisoned. This brings us to our final point.

There is a disconnection between which experiences are associated with women saying they used drugs to deal with “emotional pain” and which experiences women believe to be related to their incarceration. It is precisely this disconnection that we are interested in because it is this “incoherence” that suggests that women’s understandings of their imprisonment are shaped by discourses, both psychiatric and popular, that posit childhood sexual violence as the experience most likely to shape adult experiences. That is, because childhood sexual violence is so often assumed to be responsible for negative behaviors and life outcomes, women who have experienced this type of violence seem to have internalized this reading and now use this discourse to make sense of their own situation—even absent the mediating behaviors, such as drug use, that would give this explanation empirical support. Indeed, the qualitative data show that women feel that childhood sexual violence “damaged” them to the point of no return. Many felt that sexual violence in their childhood left them vulnerable to sexual violence in adulthood and in effect, sealed their fate so that they were imprisoned. Discourses, medical and more broadly societal, frame sexual assault survivors as “damaged” to the extent that they are defined by those experiences for the rest of their lives. In other words, their subsequent actions are framed as “a result of” sexual violence.

The explanation of incarceration as being due to women’s experiences with violence tends to fix incarceration as a fait accompli. This violence frame inscribes a sense of catastrophic “moral failure” on prisoners, thus obscuring socioeconomic, political, and institutional inequalities that act as centripetal forces that sweep poor women of color and poor White women toward the expanding carceral system. Whether these women are the agents or victims of “moral failure,” dominant public discourse views incarceration as the result of an individual’s poor behavior or decision making rather than the result of entrenched racial, socioeconomic, and gender inequality (Sudbury, 2005; Davis, 2003). Women prisoners learn to narrate their life journeys through interactions with social services, prison therapists, and psychiatrists. These professionals—rather than contextualizing the women’s lives within a larger racist, sexist, and violent social structure—define the women’s pathways in individual, behavioral, psychological, and/or moral terms.

These gendered victims’ discourses are advanced and naturalized for imprisoned women and help to shape a gendered, racialized, and heteronormative carceral state. Rather than identifying structural conditions that lead to imprisonment—including changes in laws, racist and sexist legislation, poverty, lack of resources and jobs, and social vulnerability over the course of one’s life—gendered victims’ discourses “blame the individual” for social problems and help to maintain, strengthen, and justify the carceral state. Indeed, it is the carceral state that decides *which* women are even “qualified” to attend reentry programs. The state, then, controls who has access to certain programs and what discourses are used to understand and define one’s life history and relationship to imprisonment. These victims’ discourses justify the existence of prisons themselves while putting the onus of social problems on the very populations managed by the carceral state.

At the same time, the ramifications of understanding a woman’s incarceration through the filter of victimization discourses occludes the fact that, as feminists and feminist criminologists continue to point out (Beckett & Sasson, 2004; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Girshick, 1999), there is an absence of social institutions that support women or that could intervene in an individual’s path toward incarceration. If it is true that psychological discourses, particularly those popular within the welfare and prison state, obscure structural explanations of violence from incarcerated women, radical education programs, perhaps in the forms of free-schools, for formerly incarcerated women can work to provide alternative, and more structural, explanations of interpersonal and state violence. Given the extraordinarily high percentages of socially vulnerable imprisoned women who report having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse, immediate, short-term intervention for women who have experienced all forms of violence is in order. Institutional change and support, through means such as resource provision and the creation of violence crisis centers in marginalized communities, is

necessary if we are to curtail incarceration rates and support the most socially vulnerable women. Moreover, because women who have experienced interpersonal violence often become involved in sex work and turn to drugs to cope with experiences of abuse, decriminalization of sex work (Stremmler, 1994) and illicit substances (Balfour & Comack, 2006) could move us away from punishing the survival strategies of women who have endured violence. Moreover, we find that adult markers of social vulnerability are especially important; thus, job creation, particularly of jobs that provide a living wage, is imperative to combat social vulnerability. Finally, felony convictions exclude people from employment (Pager, 2007) and lower formerly convicted people's incomes, when they do find work, throughout their lifetimes (Western, 2002; Western & Pettit, 2005). They also decrease the quality of formerly convicted people's family lives (Lopoo & Western, 2005; Western & McLanahan, 2000). Moreover, people who have been convicted of felonies are locked out of the welfare state—denied access to public housing, barred from receiving educational grants, and, in some states, even denied food stamps (Mele & Miller, 2005; Wacquant, 2001). In the words of social geographer Ruth Gilmore (2008), felony convictions produce civil deaths. As such, liberation for previously incarcerated women will not be fully attainable until states enact automatic expungement laws to remove felony convictions from the records of all people who have served their sentences. Radical education, community support, decriminalization, job creation, and automatic expungement could work together to push back against the web of interpersonal and state violence experienced by so many marginalized women.

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Notes

1. The data on "women in prison" and their experiences with violence tend not to address transwomen, who are housed in

men's institutions and have also experienced a great deal of violence both before and during imprisonment (Sudbury, 2011). More research must be done to understand these experiences and their intersections with race, class, sexuality, and gender.

2. Only one study that we are aware of has controlled for social vulnerability when examining any of these relationships, and it is limited to an examination of the effects of experiencing sexual violence on committing sex crimes (Widom & Ames, 1994).
3. In addition, we were interested in including a state with sentencing guidelines (Florida) and one without guidelines (Illinois). In the end, we found no evidence that this distinction effected the research questions we were examining.
4. We sent out surveys with 250 book orders and received 170 completed surveys back; this is 68% of the total number distributed.
5. To gather information on women's experiences of interpersonal violence, the survey asked the following questions: Did you experience sexual violence as a girl? By girl, we mean before you were 18? Were you physically abused as a girl? By girl, we mean before you were 18? Have you been physically abused by a lover? Have you been raped? and Have you ever felt forced to engage in sex work—either for money or for drugs? In each case, respondents could answer yes, no, not sure, and no answer. Not sure and no answer responses were coded as missing.
6. The overrepresentation of White women is most likely due to racial disparities in Chicago Books to Women in Prison's clients. However, it may also be the result of non-White women's greater distrust of social science (Ladner, 1987).
7. This discrepancy may be due to differences in the structure of the questions. Our sample only asked about parents; the Bureau of Justice Statistics asks about "all immediate family members."
8. We use transwomen to signify all people who were assigned male at birth but currently identify as women. We use transmen to signify all people who were assigned female at birth but currently identify as men.
9. In 2011, Cook County, Illinois, enacted a new policy that allows people to be incarcerated based on their chosen gender. However, policies like this are still rare.

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Bios

Traci Schlesinger is an assistant professor of sociology at DePaul University. Her work centers on examinations of the ways in which criminal law and criminal processing work to produce mass racialized incarceration. Her articles have appeared in *Justice Quarterly*, *JJIJS*, *NWSAJ*, and *Crime & Delinquency*.

Jodie M. Lawston is an associate professor of women's studies at California State University San Marcos. She is the author of *Sisters Outside: Radical Activists Working for Women Prisoners* (2009) and co-editor of *Razor Wire Women: Prisoners, Activists, Scholars, and Artists* (2011) both published with SUNY Press.