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

Dana DeHart

University of South Carolina - Columbia, [dana.dehart@sc.edu](mailto:dana.dehart@sc.edu)

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PATHWAYS TO PRISON:  
IMPACT OF VICTIMIZATION IN THE LIVES OF INCARCERATED WOMEN

Dana D. DeHart, Ph.D.

Center for Child & Family Studies

University of South Carolina

College of Social Work

Columbia, SC 29208

[dana.dehart@sc.edu](mailto:dana.dehart@sc.edu)

803-777-7867

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ABSTRACT

This study examined ways in which victimization may contribute to criminal involvement among incarcerated women. We conducted interviews with 60 women in a maximum security prison to gather each woman's perspective on psychological, physical, and sexual victimization in her life. Qualitative analyses indicated ways that victimization related directly to women's crimes as well as influenced health, psychosocial functioning, or systemic involvement to create difficult situations with which the women struggled. Case histories are used to illustrate pervasive impacts of victimization, and role of multiple traumas and cumulative impact are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** victimization; incarcerated women; prisoners; inmates; crime; gender.

## INTRODUCTION

Theorists have argued that women's imprisonment is largely attributable to "unsolved social problems" (Fine, 1992)—drug addiction, prostitution, and retaliation against abusive partners. These behaviors have been alternately conceptualized as crimes and as survival strategies to cope with overwhelming physical, sexual, and psychological victimization. There is growing interest in the role that victimization may play among other factors such as poverty, family fragmentation, school failure, and physical and mental health problems in contributing to a developmental “pathway” to crime (Acoca, 1999; Belknap & Holsinger, 1998; Harden & Hill, 1998; OJJDP, 1998; Owen & Bloom, 2000). Research has indicated victimization to be a central factor, and that victimization is pervasive among delinquent girls and incarcerated women (Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Cauffman et al., 1988; Steiner, Garcia, & Mathews, 1997; Wood et al., 2002a/b). Yet there has been little study of qualitative dynamics that link victimization and crime.

There is some indication that the link may begin early in life. Acoca and Austin (1996) report that approximately half of incarcerated women were first arrested as juveniles. In turn, studies of female juvenile offenders indicate that a majority report their first arrest as running away from home to avoid abuse (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992). Research also indicates that girls from violent homes are at heightened risk for delinquent behavior such as sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, truancy, running away, and property crime (Osofsky, 1999; Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004; Widom, 1995a/b). Avoidance of legal guardianship, proximity to motivated offenders, and participation in risky behavior may place the girls at risk for repeated victimization by strangers, acquaintances, and intimates

(Lake, 1993; Widom, 2000). For runaways, prostitution and property crime become means of survival, and drugs are both a way of numbing and of making fast cash.

A deficiency of research on specific mechanisms by which victimization and crime are linked may place women at a distinct disadvantage by de-contextualizing women's criminal acts and disallowing consideration of mitigating circumstances such as the role of abuse and coercion (Raeder, 1993). Examining violence as an organizing principle in incarcerated women's life histories may provide insight into the motivations, responsibilities, and rehabilitative needs of female offenders. The current study extends beyond prevalence to explore incarcerated women's own perspectives on critical events and ways that life factors intersected to bring the women to prison.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 60 women randomly sampled from a maximum security state correctional facility (90% participation rate). Participants included 52% African Americans and 48% Whites, ranging in age from 18 to 70, with a median age of 31. The women were incarcerated for: murder (12%); voluntary manslaughter (12%); armed, strong-arm, or common-law robbery (12%); cocaine or crack manufacture, distribution, or trafficking (12%); homicide by child abuse (10%); forgery (8%); burglary (7%); arson (5%); shoplifting (5%); kidnapping (3%); assault and battery (3%); felony driving under the influence (3%); child neglect (3%); lewd act on a child (2%); grand larceny (2%); and financial transaction card theft (2%). Our sample embodied a range of victimization and criminal experiences for “strategic coverage” of the phenomena under exploration (Johnson,

1990; Werner & Bernard, 1994), and our sample size of 60 is generous for a qualitative study (Lee & Fielding, 1996; Swanson, 1986).

### Measures

Open-ended interview prompts addressed family and relationship history, physical and psychological victimization, lifetime delinquency and crime, and interactions with social service and justice systems. Prison policy did not allow taping of interviews, so handwritten fieldnotes were transcribed by the interviewer immediately after each interview (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). We attempted to be accurate in representing each woman's thoughts and using her language. We chose third-person perspective to underscore that these are not direct quotes, but rather women's words have been "filtered" through the transcription process. Archival data included prison demographic and criminal-history records and, when available, media reports obtained via searches of NewsLibrary.com.

### Analyses

Interview transcripts were analyzed by the interviewer/author using the ATLAS/ti qualitative software and a grounded-theory approach (Strauss, 1987). Because this approach does not use pre-determined categories for data coding, and rigorous analyses necessitate "promiscuous" coding rather than using mutually exclusive categories, we followed a qualitative versus quantitative tradition for data integrity (i.e., checks against multiple data sources versus intercoder reliability analyses; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Sanjek, 1990; Stewart, 1998; Wolcott, 1995). We developed chronological timelines for events in each participant's life using interview transcripts, prison records, and media reports. This helped assess whether cases contained troubling discrepancies that might threaten data integrity, and we were encouraged by women's apparent candor.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our qualitative methodology helped to capture the subjectivity of victimization's impact in the lives of incarcerated women—what each woman carried with her and what endured the everyday palliations and embellishments of remembering, reexperiencing, and retelling.

Perhaps the most striking testament to what these women had endured was evident as they sat in the interview room telling their stories—and not just in their speech and palpable emotion. Some lifted their sleeves or moved aside uniforms to show scars as they spoke.

Other women's faces showed remnants of extreme damage, including the body's attempts to heal without the benefit of medical attention. These things, coupled with the sheer number of stories, underscored the magnitude and intensity of what the women had survived. We came to realize that quantitative accounts often decontextualized violence so much that accounts failed to attest to entrenchment of victimization in these women's lives, transformed horrors into something readable, and most importantly, eradicated much of the subjectivity that is so crucial in understanding impact.

Our identification of themes in the women's stories focused on direct impact of victimization on delinquent and criminal activity, indirect means by which victimization might influence female offending via impact on life circumstances, and integration of these two types of findings for broader perspective on cumulative impact and potential pathways from victimization to crime.

### Direct Impact of Victimization on Delinquent and Criminal Activity

Richie (1996) described the incarcerated women with whom she worked as "confined by social conditions in their communities, restrained by their families' circumstances, severely limited by abuse in their intimate relationships, and forced to make hard choices with very

few options" (p.5). She characterized the women as "compelled to crime." Similarly, for some women in our sample, victimization appeared to relate directly to involvement in delinquent or criminal activity. This occurred in a number of ways, including as child corruption or as perceived force, provocation, or pressure to commit the crime.

For quite a few women in our sample, this began early in life—as girls—with caregivers or other adults providing them with alcohol or other drugs, forcing them to steal, or prostituting them. These forms of child maltreatment are variously labeled "missocializing" or "corrupting" and "sexual exploitation" (APSAC, 1995; Hart, Germain & Brassard, 1987; NECF, 2004).

*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.*

*Chantelle left home because of the drug use—her mom and dad high all the time, men coming in and out of the house. They'd go straight to Chantelle's room.*

*Chantelle's parents would take money, the keys to a car, whatever. Chantelle laid there and took it. It started as fondling, but then there was also intercourse. It happened more times than she can count—whenever anyone came by with money, every weekend and sometimes during the week.*

In adulthood, many of the women in our sample committed at least some of their criminal acts as direct responses to physical victimization. Nearly half of participants described events in their adult lives when they committed assaults that might be characterized as defensive or retaliatory efforts to end abuse. That is, assaults had been directly preceded by a physical assault or threat to the woman or her family.



*Josie's boyfriend jumped her at her mother's house. Josie stabbed him something like 12 times. She was tired of him flipping on her.*

*A woman convicted of manslaughter was married to a man who raped her 8-year-old daughter. After this, he and the woman were fighting about it, and he began to tell her what he was going to do to her daughter when the daughter got older. The woman told him she was going to kill him, and that's what she did. She pulled a kitchen knife out of the drawer and stabbed and killed him. Stabbed in through the heart—or right beside the heart, just missed.*

Beyond defensive or retaliatory assaults, some women in our sample described events in their adult lives when they were forced (through physical attacks or threat thereof) to commit other crimes such as shoplifting, check fraud, robbery, prostitution, or murder.

*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.*

A handful of additional women took blame for or committed criminal acts in response to more subtle pressure or provocation. This includes being manipulated or "talked into" doing the crime, confessing to an abuser's crime due to fear of the abuser, committing physical assaults in response to psychological victimization, or participating in relationship violence that was characterized by the woman as "mutual."

*A 44-year-old White woman explained that her husband would hit and slap her. One day he was angry about having to go with her to visit her mother. He had previously lost his driver's license, and he hit a car on the way. He told the police that she had*

*been driving. She was afraid to say that it hadn't been her driving, so she got the ticket and had 2 points taken off her license. This was her first run-in with the law.*

As is evident in these stories, the component of personal choice for the woman and the range of force used to compel her to crime varied from one event to another. Such personal choice is an important consideration in evaluating these findings in their entirety, as our discussion of victimization is not intended to provide an excuse for the crime's occurrence.

### Indirect Impact of Victimization via Life Circumstances

To understand the choices that women made, it is helpful to explore impediments faced elsewhere in their lives, particularly as these are created or exacerbated by victimization. For many women in our sample, victimization impacted life circumstances in ways that contributed to the women's marginalization from mainstream or legitimate avenues. That is, victimization in the lives of these women influenced their physical or mental health, had effects on their psychosocial functioning, or influenced involvement in private and public systems such as family and work.

#### Effects on Physical or Mental Health

##### *Physical Injury.*

A majority of women in our sample sustained severe injuries (Straus et al., 1996) such as passing out, having broken bones, and needing medical attention. Many of the women had enduring reminders of physical injuries—scars, chronic pain, and permanent disabilities.

*Pauletta's husband jumped on her and disfigured her eye. She wasn't married to him yet—her mom warned her about marrying a guy who already was disfiguring her face.*

*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.*

*Lorraine looks at her scars and gunshot wounds—she's got a bullet in her leg that every time it rains starts aching—and she thinks back to how she almost died. Thank God she's alive to tell someone about it.*

Thus, these attackers were able to instill more than pain, fear, and intimidation. They succeeded in branding some women with enduring stigma, and taking from others privileges such as mobility and motherhood. The time and finances necessary for healing are two of countless other costs that stemmed from physical injury.

#### *Non-Injury Effects on Physical Health.*

Both in childhood and adulthood, some women were subject to deprivation that had potential for serious health consequences.

*A woman convicted of child neglect explained that her parents were drug addicts and never paid much attention to her. She was hungry a lot as a child. She used to go out in the yard and crack walnuts to eat.*

*Amy and her husband lived at the lake, and he would take off in the car and leave her there when he went gambling. The city came and turned off the power and the water and the phone, and she was stuck out there—near nothing, with no car, no food, no water. She was pregnant. Her dad tried to call and there was no phone service, so he went by and had to take Amy to the hospital with dehydration.*

Sexual abuse had numerous health effects, including unplanned pregnancy, STDs, and HIV, as well as associated effects on relationships and overall life circumstances.

*Thelma said that since the sexual assault that gave her HIV, she is limited in her sources for having a relationship. She thinks that nobody would want her now that she is HIV-positive. If something happens with her current boyfriend, she's afraid she won't be able to find another one.*

#### *Mental Disorders, Suicidality, and Addiction.*

For a few women in our sample, victimization may have acted as a stressful life factor that precipitated onset or exacerbated existing illness.

*Tammy's grandmom sent Tammy to a mental health facility when she was 12. Tammy had flipped out—jumped on her grandmom and was hitting her. Tammy was upset about the whole situation—her grandmom had found out about her dad abusing her, and they had to go to court. The mental health place put Tammy on depression and nerve medicine and made her go to counseling after she got out.*

Many women in our sample mentioned suicidal thoughts or efforts in association with victimization. Victimization also had an impact through addictive behaviors, as when girls were introduced to alcohol and other drugs by adults and this contributed directly to ongoing substance abuse. Victimization contributed to addiction in a more indirect manner when women used addictive behaviors to cope. This was pervasive in our sample, and many women discussed alcohol and drugs as a way to "numb" themselves—either in anticipation of abuse or in dealing with its ongoing stress or aftermath.

*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.*

Like effects on physical health, impact of victimization on mental health has wide-ranging implications, including ability to perform in school and work, influence on relationships, impact on finances through medical costs or substance needs, and so on.

### Psychosocial Effects

There were also psychosocial effects not clearly identifiable as mental disorders.

*Internalizing—Distress, Worthlessness, and Withdrawal.*

Some women's stories regarding the impact of victimization included descriptions of behaviors that might be described as "internalizing" or overcontrolled behaviors. These included feelings of emotional distress, worthlessness, and withdrawal from activities (Martin, 2003). The most prevalent manifestations were persistent fear or discomfort.

*Nancy's dad used child abuse on her if she skipped school, got bad grades—little things. He'd beat her with his fists, hard. There weren't a lot of injuries, but the children lived in a world of fear. They didn't know when he'd decide to raise hell.*

*When Amanda was 5 or 6, she started getting sexually abused. She didn't know how to talk to anybody about it, but it made her not feel safe.*

Such private feelings took on a new dimension given the possibility of public discovery of abuse. Often, this included feelings of shame, self-blame, or embarrassment.

*A 46-year-old White woman said she never told a soul about the childhood sexual abuse. She felt it was her fault, because that man had given her a doll, and she had taken it. He had asked her what she wanted and what she would do anything in the*

*world for. She connected her feelings of being uncomfortable, the shame over what he did, with the doll.*

*Pauletta's husband would give her black eyes about three times a year. That's what would bother her, because she had to go out with that.*

For some women, the shame they felt about victimization had a substantial and enduring impact on self-esteem. They described feeling degraded, "torn down," and like outcasts.

*Joyce couldn't find words to describe how she felt about the rape. "It just felt—uuuuuh," she groaned, signifying despair. She knew both of the men who raped her, and that's what made it so hard. She couldn't believe people who knew her would do that. They degraded her—snatching her out of the road and dragging her back there behind a dumpster.*

A few women described feeling like a "target" for abuse and began to accept the label.

*Dawn thought maybe it was "her"—it had happened so many times that it seemed like it had to be her.*

These psychological effects of fear, shame, and low self-worth have potential to reach the very core of women as they interact in the world. It is thereby not surprising that some girls and women began to avoid places and things, restricting their range of activities.

*Betty didn't like to go outside of the house much when she was a child. It wasn't boys that were the problem. It was family--uncles and cousins. She cut herself off from everything. She just got in a chair, got quiet, and stayed to herself.*

*Externalizing—Aggression and Acting Out.*

For some women in our sample, victimization was associated with "externalizing" or under-controlled behaviors—anger, aggression, or acting out (Martin, 2003).

*Kelly would see her grandmom do violence, and she would think it was okay for her to do, too. "She hurt me, I hurt somebody else....The low man on the totem pole got to catch all the weight—get all the bad of everything."*

*Laura started getting in trouble a lot after her mother's boyfriend had touched her. She began throwing stuff at cars, starting fires, tearing stuff up, and raising hell. Now that she thinks back on it, she thinks she was trying to make someone ask what was wrong.*

Such externalizing was often a source of girls' first entry into public disciplinary systems—being suspended at school or apprehended by law enforcement.

#### *Perspectives on Personal Relationships.*

For the women in our sample, victimization also may have had an impact on the women's perspectives on relationships, with some viewing maltreatment as a normal part of life.

*Linda never really missed her mother. It was like it was natural for kids to be there by their selves all the time.*

For many women in our sample, victimization was associated with a loss of trust, and relationships were viewed through a lens of suspicion. Generalized distrust sometimes resulted in self-imposed isolation as a way of protecting oneself from further victimization or discovery of abuse. Sometimes, distrust was specifically directed at boys or men.

*A woman convicted of manslaughter explained that for a long time, she hated men. Part of her still does because of all the abuse—she was abused for 13 years by different men. It's not like she's going to get out of prison and be gay, but it pushes her away from getting involved too quickly with men. She doesn't know what she might do if she's pushed to the limit again.*

Paradoxically, these perspectives on relationships sometimes seemed at odds with women's natural inclinations to move toward relationships. One woman, for instance, spoke of being "disgusted by sex" yet "needing it, like anybody else." Another spoke of being "starved for love instead of [her] momma's beatings." It is plausible that such contradictions resulted in some women's settling into relationships that they anticipated would be bad.

#### Effects on Systems

Victimization also had an impact on girls' or women's involvement in ecological systems such as families, peer networks, and schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is consistent with assertions by Gilfus (1992) and Arnold (1995) that physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and other victimization serve to "structurally dislocate" women from "legitimate" social institutions. Specifically, abuse and its effects may push girls and women out of families and peer groups, homes, schools or workplaces, and institutions of worship.

#### *Effects on the Family and Peer Groups.*

Experiences of neglect or abuse sometimes had an impact on the size, structure, or cohesion of family and peer networks.

*As Becca got older, she wasn't comfortable with what was going on, and she told her mom about the sexual abuse. Her mom and dad separated, and her dad went to stay with his brother. Becca could sense the tension in the house, like either her mom blamed Becca or was angry at Becca's dad or was angry at herself.*

*When Raquel was 13, her mother put two big time dealers in the house to sell drugs. One of the dealers asked Raquel's mother if he could take Raquel to another city with him to live. Raquel's mom said, "For a price." He gave her mom \$250 worth of crack and took Raquel with him. After a while, Raquel went back for a visit. That's*



*when Raquel found out that her mom had been in a shelter and just left Raquel's brothers and sisters there. Now they were in DSS custody and separated. Raquel went to go stay with her aunt, but when Raquel tried to commit suicide, the hospital called DSS. Then Raquel's godmother and godfather said they would take her.*

As Raquel goes on to say, changes in residence involved changes in caregivers, living conditions, rules, and household practices. Other types of family disruption included families the women developed in adult life, and sometimes involved their own children being removed by authorities or used as pawns by batterers. There were so many impacts of violence on the women's children that these merit discussion in a separate report.

Finally, victimization impacted peer systems. Peer networks were largely influenced by the girls' moves from one caregiver to the next—moves that often involved changes in neighborhoods and schools. In adulthood, some women were intentionally isolated from social networks by controlling partners, and others were alienated by friends who had grown weary of the woman's repeated returns to a batterer.

*Patricia feels ashamed that she let someone beat her, and that she put her buddies in the middle of it. She would call them to come and get her. Eventually they stopped coming because they said she was just going to go back to him.*

Perceived rejection by family or friends exacerbated feelings of worthlessness, and for some, the default response was to turn to drugs to cope or try to "fit in" with new peers.

#### *Effects on Home or Property.*

Victimization frequently resulted in loss of home for women in our sample. This loss was often associated with loss of family, as well as with loss of property. Many women discussed running away from home, often as a means of coping with or escaping abuse.

*LaShawn coped with the sexual abuse by running away. She was 10 the first time she ran away, and ran away about six or seven times. She would run away and stay gone for days. While she was gone she would get with older men and stay with them in hotels or at their house. Most of the time she would have sex with them.*

As is evident in LaShawn's case, sometimes the women ran from one abuser only to be exploited by others. Sometimes leaving home was not voluntary, in that girls were removed by social services after reports of abuse or neglect. In adulthood, women sometimes lost their homes as they tried to escape abusive partners. Some women had the resources to move, while others were forced into homelessness or had to seek out friends or a new partner to live with. Some moved far away or to secret locations to prevent stalking.

Sometimes loss of home was due to eviction—for instance, when families were evicted for parental drug use or when women were evicted due to actions of a batterer. In these cases, families were not necessarily kept intact, as children were often sent to live with different friends or relatives. Property also was sometimes left behind during these moves. In the following case, a woman convicted of shoplifting describes her loss of home as well as collateral damage and costs of her boyfriend's violence.

*Her boyfriend was constantly destroying doors and windows breaking in. The woman still owes over \$1000 to the housing authority. She had to steal more to pay for repairs. They told him not to trespass, and the neighbors called police, but she couldn't keep him out—he would break the doors and the windows. They finally evicted her because of the damage.*

These losses tend to accumulate, and women sometimes have difficulty reestablishing themselves given meager resources and compromised standing with property managers.

*Effects on School and Work.*

Victimization also had implications for girls' and women's performance at school or in the workplace. Several women discussed poor academic performance as a byproduct of their parents' lack of interest in their behavior. Failure to encourage or assist children in doing well at school and failure to ensure attendance are classified as cognitive, emotional, or supervision neglect (Straus, 2004). Within our sample, these were often facets of broader patterns of maltreatment in the girls' homes, and were often associated with the caregivers' own alcohol or drug addiction. Neglect and more severe emotional, physical, and sexual abuse undermined motivation and impaired girls' abilities to concentrate on schoolwork.

*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.*

For other girls, the sequelae of abuse—conduct problems, depression, stigma, pregnancy, addiction—played a role. Acting out resulted in suspension for some girls, and other sequelae contributed to the girls' dropping out of school altogether.

*The kids at school had always teased Cindy. She didn't feel like she fit in, and she was bullied. It was like walking to a hanging—to the gallows—going to school. When she was in ninth grade, she and a friend were walking and got jumped by two guys from school. They raped the girls and shoved objects up Cindy's rectum. There was a court case about it, and then the whole school found out. They teased her more then. One girl started all this teasing, pelting with acorns, name-calling. After that, school was just a bad place for Cindy to be. She began cutting classes, and within a year, she dropped out.*

In adulthood, victimization impacted career efficacy of many women in our sample. They discussed missing work due to beatings, having to change jobs or quit to please controlling partners, and being fired due to stalking and harassment by husbands and boyfriends. This instability of performance did not contribute to women's financial autonomy, and, again, compromised reputations—this time with prospective employers. One might imagine that women struggled to find a path in life as barriers were erected at every turn.

*Effects on Faith or Religion.*

Like many people in desperation do, Kelly turned to religion.

*Kelly got into church for a few months when she was in her early 20s. Then her grandmother cursed her, "You think you got religion? You ain't got nothing." Kelly's grandmother would give Kelly everything and then tear it down with a few words.*

For many in our sample, faith had at some point been an important support. Some were active church-goers at one time or another, and some discussed losing faith.

*When Becca was a child, her mom frequently said things like "God said you'll never be nothing." "Evidently," Becca said, "He did say that, because look at my life."*

Becca described her faith in God as “shaky,” which was not surprising given her mother's reprisals paired with the fact that Becca had been beaten and exploited by several men who quoted scripture and preached. She was also raped at gunpoint by a man who turned out to be a minister. Despite being a talented singer and pianist, Becca doesn't participate in the prison's choir program because, "It would be singing to someone who can't stand me."

Women who discussed loss of faith often framed the loss in terms of their own worthlessness. Spiritual loss was often accompanied by social and material losses as women withdrew from involvement in religious networks. This is particularly troubling given that

houses of worship may have resources to address barriers and sometimes extend beyond spiritual support to provide services to community members in need.

### Cumulative Impact and Pathways between Victimization to Crime

If one examines the different areas of impact discussed here, the litany of effects is not new to the victimization literature. Incarcerated women experienced some of the same violence as experienced by other women, and they experienced some of the same effects. What is remarkable within this sample is the cumulative impact of victimization over the life span. Most of the women suffered multiple traumas and were victimized in multiple ways (e.g., child abuse and neglect, adult relationship violence, sexual violence). The varied impacts of poly-victimization (i.e., experiencing simultaneous episodes of different types of victimization; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2004) had potential to create ripple effects in multiple arenas in the women's lives, causing overall disruption and pushing the women out of the mainstream. Often, the intersection of losses seemed to create uniquely difficult situations. For the following two case examples, consider the breadth and depth of trauma experienced by each woman, and think about the resolve and stamina that would be needed to overcome barriers, achieve stability, and thrive.

*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.*

*When Sandra was 14, she got married to this 19-year-old dude. When Sandra's dad found out, he had a fit. A week later, they were at the house to celebrate. Sandra's momma had killed a hog and was preparing the hog. Sandra's daddy was tore up. He and her husband had words, and maybe a scuffle. Sandra's daddy shot the boy twice through the heart. After that, Sandra tried to take her life—took an overdose of sleeping pills—but her momma took her to the hospital. Within a month, Sandra's momma had the heart attack and died. Sandra believes worrying is what caused her momma's heart attack—because the police were coming and took each of the family members and asked them separately what happened with the shooting. Sandra and her momma had told the truth, but her dad said that Sandra's husband was coming at him and that he had a knife in his hand. Sandra's daddy got upset, saying, "Y'all gonna get me put away." Then he left—a week after her mother died. Sandra dropped out of school and did her best to raise her brothers and sisters. She picked peaches, stole, cleaned houses to get by.*

For these girls—like others in our sample—such events occurred within a small timeframe within the broader context of their lives and were preceded and followed by additional trauma—other rapes in childhood and adulthood, beatings in teen and adult relationships, loss of parents and children, medical problems and disabilities, and so on. What they experienced might be described as unrelenting trauma. In quantitative studies of polyvictimization, Finkelhor and associates (2005) found that sheer number of

victimizations was a better predictor of symptomatology than any particular type of victimization. Similarly, Felitti and Anda (2008), studying “adverse childhood experiences” (“ACEs,” including—among other things—physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect) found increasingly negative effects when multiple ACEs were present. If one imagines the devastation of even a single traumatic event (e.g., a rape, a beating, death of a loved one), then considers how an individual recovers when a series of such events occurs in rapid succession, it may be possible to fathom a fraction of the impact that these girls experienced. For the girls, getting back to a path of normalcy—if indeed they ever had an opportunity to walk such a path—surely would be a difficult task.

#### Pathways from Victimization to Crime

Examining aggregate data on victimization's impact allowed us to map possible pathways by which victimization may relate to criminal behavior for girls and women (Table 1). Some of these pathways derive from the girls' experiences of child corruption or abuse and are quite straightforward. For instance, women who were prostituted as children by their caregivers may have continued prostitution into adolescence or adulthood. Similarly, women introduced to drugs by adults may have entered into lifelong addictions. There also may exist more complex or indirect pathways. For instance, drug addiction stemming from victimization's impact may have led to other crimes.

*A woman convicted of shoplifting explained that after being introduced at age 12 to freebasing cocaine by neighborhood adults, she freebased as often as she could.*

*She'd either get it for free from the neighbors or steal money from her mom, babysit for drug money, or shoplift to get money.*

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Table 1 about here

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Girls who ran away from home to escape abuse may have found it necessary to trade sex to obtain food or shelter while on the street, or girls who had "consensual" relationships with statutory rapists may have become accustomed to trading sex for material goods or drugs.

*A woman convicted of robbery said that when she was 14 or 15, she would have sex with her 30-year-old godbrother for money. By the time she was 16, it was with her boyfriends—she wasn't their girlfriend for free. She'd make them take her to get her hair and nails done. They'd make sure she had spending money all the time. The first time she had sex with a guy she didn't know for money was an old white man that she met walking down the street—he came up to her and propositioned her. When she started getting high regularly, it was anybody who had money.*

Other pathways derived from adult relationship violence, as when women were coerced by partners into shoplifting or prostitution, or when women retaliated against abuse.

In considering these pathways, we must be mindful of the cumulative impact of victimization to comprehend why women chose illegitimate over legitimate pathways. For instance, if some of the pathways in Table 1 were embedded in latent variable models, we would likely see not only the paths shown, but also moderating or mediating influences exerted by physical and mental health problems, impaired psychosocial functioning, and systemic marginalization. The following cases illustrate how accumulation of negative life circumstances and the accompanying stress may contribute to crime.

*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 in 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."*

*A woman convicted of murder explained that a lot of things led up to why she did it. She had just had a baby and was having conflicts at home with her mother. She went to another state to be where nobody knew her, to start over. She ended up getting raped at gunpoint. She doesn't know if the baby she killed was his. Lots of folks thought that's why she did it, but it's not. Her mother had taken the new baby. The woman had wanted the baby so that—and this may sound selfish—but so she'd have someone to love and who would love her back. She had lots going on, and she kept things to herself. She told her mother, her minister, and her best friend—right before it happened—that she felt like she was going to snap. It wasn't directed toward anybody—like not toward the baby. She doesn't want to remember it—or can't. She remembers standing over him with a knife in her hand, and she remembers lots of blood. She remembers being on the phone but not to who, and she remembers the cops coming at her. She didn't get up and plan it.*

The links between victimization and crime have potential to become more convoluted as women fall deeper into criminal careers. Their involvement in criminal activity, association with criminal networks, and presence in known crime venues such as crack houses may subject them to further victimization (i.e., additional links between crime and victimization;

see Table 1). The following case example illustrates the entanglement of victimization and crime through the experience of one woman.

*A 29-year-old African American woman was with a friend of a friend, and they were going to go to a crackhouse to get high. On the way, he turned onto the highway and sucker-punched her. He drove way out by the railroad tracks, so that nobody could hear her scream. Said he'd teach her about getting in the car with strangers. He made her give him oral sex. He beat her from eleven at night until the birds were chirping in the morning. He had a bottle of white liquor that he offered her. He was almost drunk and she was taking swigs but spitting it out the window without him seeing. He fell asleep with his pants down around his ankles. She robbed him—got \$550—and even took the change in his pockets. She got out of the truck and ran. The guy got locked up, and later, a whole crew of guys the woman knew got together and jumped him, put sugar in his gas tank, sliced his tires, stole his stereo system.*

Here, one can identify a path from crime to victimization to more crime. Judging from this account and others like it, the women in our sample led chaotic existences that, one would imagine, might relegate them to ongoing struggles in "keeping their heads above water."

## CONCLUSIONS

Women in our sample were, throughout their lives, pushed away from pathways of legitimacy such as school and work. Their family and social networks often tended more toward perpetration or collusion than positive support. Their role models were often corrupt, and living contexts permeated with poverty, addiction, and violence. Given the restricted options and negative influences illustrated in women's stories, failure to choose a pathway involving crime seems more remarkable than having chosen such a pathway. This is not to

excuse or justify criminal behavior, for most women in our sample possessed a component of choice in committing their crimes. However, these findings place a frame of life circumstances around such choices, helping to understand crossroads at which choices were made and the types of things that may have helped women make different choices.

This research elucidates the multiplicity of traumas that women faced prior to prison. Most women in our sample experienced child maltreatment, sexual violence, or adult relationship violence, and most experienced more than one of these types of victimization. Victimization was often ongoing with multiple perpetrators. The associated impacts had potential to accumulate and interact over the life span, resulting in a tangle of barriers that the women faced in finding legitimate pathways in life. These findings provide qualitative corroboration for quantitative research on polyvictimization and ACEs (Felitti & Anda, 2008; Finkelhor et al., 2005), indicating need for exploration of intersecting impacts of trauma over the lifespan as well as the need for holistic approaches that address impacts in multiple realms of girls' and women's lives.

Findings also bring to bear the experiences of a sizable sample of both African American and White women to explicate themes addressed by qualitative researchers from a variety of philosophical perspectives and diverse sampling methodologies (e.g., Girshick's 1999 study of women in minimum security prison, Johnson's 2003 study of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated African American women, Baskin & Sommers' 1998 study of women involved in non-domestic "street violence," and Raphael's 2004 use of in-depth case histories). Specifically, our interpretations regarding indirect impact of victimization on criminal activity via structural dislocation shed light on possible linkage between various traumas discussed by these authors and have potential to inform debate regarding the gendered

nature of women's criminal pathways.

We anticipate a variety of practical applications for findings. Qualitative data are particularly useful for making the human connection necessary to impart awareness of victimization issues to practitioners and policymakers. For members of the criminal justice community, findings have implications for rehabilitation and accountability, including recommendations during pre-trial services, sentencing, correctional programming, and conditions of release. Findings regarding child corruption and statutory rape underscore the importance of policy and state laws concerning those who entice young people into criminal behavior. Finally, our findings can be applied to education for laypersons and professionals who come into contact with children, youth, and families so that these persons will have requisite knowledge to recognize risks and help link girls and women to valuable resources as needed across the life span.

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TABLE 1—SAMPLE PATHWAYS

Sample Pathways from Victimization to Crime

Child Corruption/Abuse

- Guardian pimps to dealers for drugs > prostitution, addiction
- Guardian makes steal for drug money > shoplifting, burglary, theft
- Guardian introduces to drugs > addiction
- Household abuse or household addiction > drugs to numb > addiction
- Household abuse > run away > trade sex > addiction, prostitution
- Statutory rapist as “sugar daddy” > trade sex > prostitution, addiction

Partner Abuse

- Partner abuses > implicated in homicide of abuser
- Partner abuses family > implicated in abuse of children
- Partner abuses > coerced into crime

Property Loss

- Abusive partner steals or damages property > financial crime to recoup losses
- Abusive partner causes eviction > homelessness, criminal affiliates > prostitution, addiction

Sample Pathways from Crime to Victimization

- Prostitution > abuse by clients
- Drug dealing > robbed or attacked by clients
- Drug use > raped or robbed due to intoxication or trying to obtain drugs

BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Dana DeHart, Ph.D., is on the research faculty at the University of South Carolina's College of Social Work, within the Center for Child & Family Studies, a multidisciplinary research and training unit supported by grants and contracts. Dr. DeHart has conducted research on women's crime and incarceration, battered women's recovery, batterer treatment, psychological abuse, intimate homicide, and service use among ethnic and sexual minorities. She has served on numerous national working groups addressing violence and victimization, and she serves as a reviewer for leading academic publishers.