

Traumatic Experiences Before Incarceration In A County Jail

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About the Authors

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Most incarcerated people have experienced a traumatic event in their life. Research indicates that up to 95% of incarcerated men and women have experienced trauma at least one time, but usually more than once.¹ These experiences of trauma are often associated with mental health difficulties and involvement in the criminal justice system. The rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), for example, are higher in incarcerated populations of both men² and women³ than in the general population of non-incarcerated people. There appears to be more people with diagnosable mental health problems with jail populations compared to prison populations. This includes mental health problems related to trauma such as major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, and both delusions and hallucinations.⁴ Much of the research that seeks to understand the association of trauma and incarceration looks for differences based on demographic variables such as age,⁵ gender,⁶⁻⁹ or race.¹⁰⁻¹¹ Many studies also assess the relationships between experiences of trauma and mental health disorders.¹²⁻¹⁶ However, one limitation throughout these studies is that trauma is often measured as whether it ever occurred at any point in the research participants' lives. There is little information regarding the potential association between the recency of experiencing a traumatic event and being incarcerated in a jail setting. A broad look at the relationship between incarceration and recent traumatic experiences may provide information to guide practice to effectively recognize and successfully treat common consequences of trauma and create ideas for future research that could impact both policy and practice.

Current Project

The Institute for Justice Research and Development (IJRD) is conducting a project in collaboration with a central Florida county jail in which we are implementing a trauma-informed care program and researching whether it is helpful on several outcomes related to emotional and psychological wellbeing. This report uses data collected from the incarcerated individuals at baseline before they participated in the trauma-informed care programming. The data collected for this report provides insight into recent traumatic experiences in the year prior to incarceration at the county jail. The sample for this report includes 49 of the 55 incarcerated individuals who participated in baseline interviews at the jail; six participants chose not to answer questions about trauma. Structured interviews with these participants occurred between August 2019 – March 2020. This report provides findings from initial data analysis, including prevalence rates of trauma and type of traumatic experiences for participants in the year preceding incarceration. Potential implications for practice and research based on the findings are discussed at the conclusion of the report.

Purpose of the Report

A high prevalence of traumatic experiences in the year prior to incarceration would potentially indicate a need for more accessible and timely treatment in the community for people who experience trauma and a need to provide empirically supported trauma-informed care in correctional settings such as county jails. Thus, the purpose of this report is to determine: 1) the percent of participants who experienced a traumatic event in the year prior to incarceration at the county jail, 2) how many traumatic experiences the county jail inmates experienced in the year prior to incarceration, and 3) the types of trauma county jail inmates experienced in the year prior to incarceration.

This information will help both mental health providers in the community and in the criminal justice system, particularly in county jails, especially when considering the importance of coordinating services between the community and the criminal justice system.¹⁷ A more thorough understanding of the role of trauma among those who become incarcerated may help target early intervention services within communities and prevent people from entering the criminal justice system. Additionally, it is important for administrators and service providers at county jails to understand the prevalence of trauma with their incarcerated individuals in general and whether traumatic experiences occurred close to incarceration. This will help practitioners both in the community and in county jails more thoroughly understand the traumatic experiences of individuals incarcerated at the county jail, potentially indicating the importance of empirically supported trauma-informed care programming.

This report also strives to help narrow the 17-year gap between research findings and implementation in the field. This 17-year gap is approximately how long it takes to develop scientific discoveries and for them to be translated into policy or practice. This report is being disseminated while conducting the larger project implementing and researching a trauma-informed care program to make the most current evidence and research accessible to stakeholders and practitioners. Rapid dissemination ensures that policymakers and practitioners are informed and armed with the information needed to provide empirically supported services.

Research Questions

This report aims to better understand the recency of traumatic experiences for people incarcerated in a county jail, along with determining the number of traumatic experiences and types of experiences in the year prior to incarceration. The data collected during baseline interviews provide information regarding trauma experiences throughout the lifetime and the time that has elapsed between the most recent traumatic experience and incarceration into the county jail. The report will use this data to answer the following research questions:

- What percentage of participants experienced a traumatic event in the year prior to incarceration?
- How many trauma traumatic events have participants experienced in the year prior to incarceration?
- What types of traumatic events did participants experience in the year prior to incarceration?

Concepts and Measures

According to the American Psychiatric Association, lifetime traumatic events are inclusive of the following experiences: direct personal experiences of victimization, threat of serious injury or death, experiences serious injury, learning of a serious injury or death occurring to a loved one, or personally witnessing an event that involves death or serious injury/threat to another person. The Trauma History Questionnaire (THQ)¹⁹ was used to measure trauma in all baseline interviews with the participants while incarcerated in the county jail. The THQ includes 24 self-report questions regarding whether an individual has experienced traumatic events. Each question provides a scenario of a traumatic experience.

Individuals respond with either a “yes” or “no” to note whether they have ever previously experienced that situation. If the response is “yes,” participants are asked how many times and at what age(s) that event occurred. Data from this measure is used to answer the three research questions.

Recent Experiences of Trauma

Figure 1: Percentage of participants with trauma experiences in the year prior to incarceration

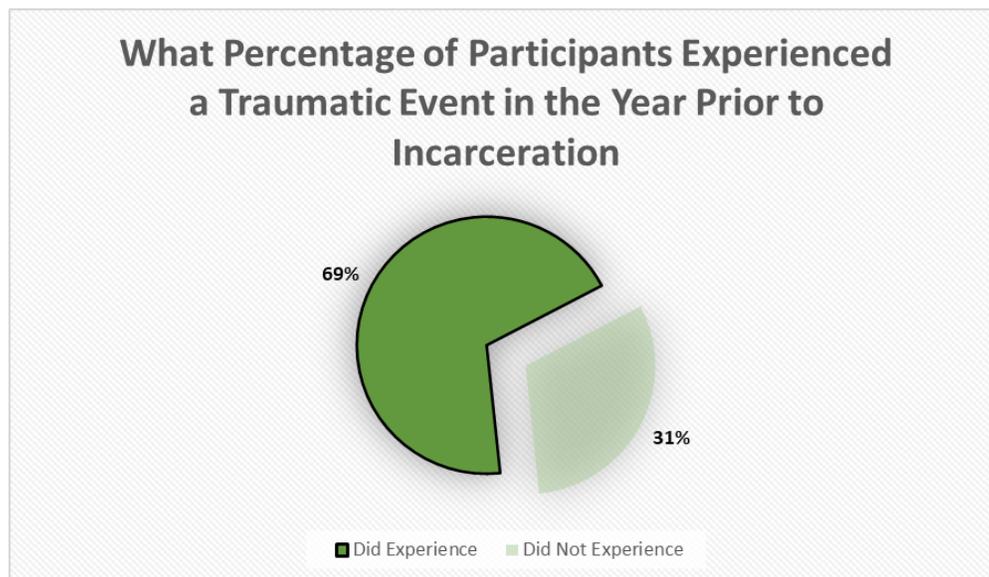
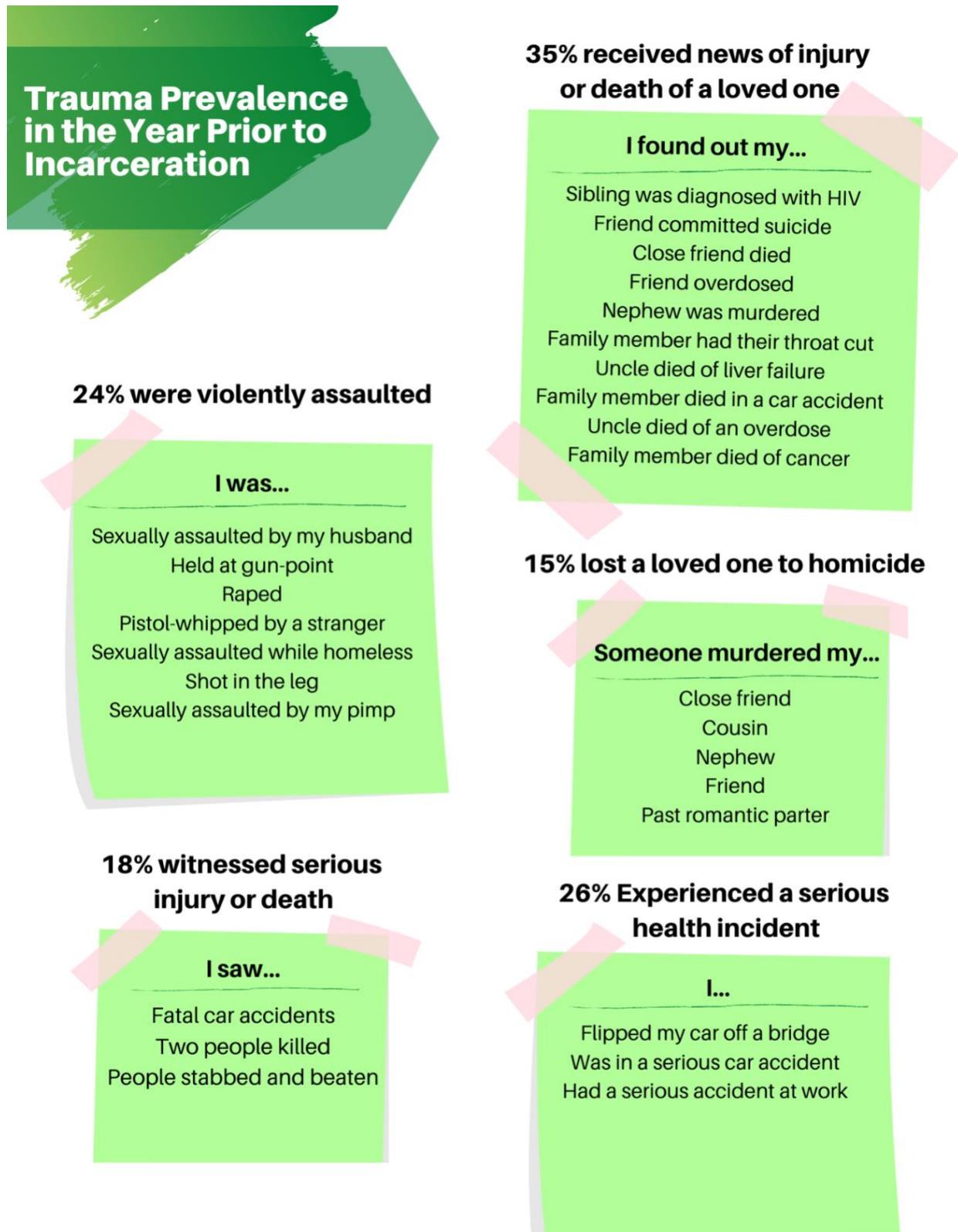


Table 1: Number of traumatic events the year prior to incarceration

# of Traumatic Events	% of Respondents
1	26%
2	18%
3	23%
4	18%
5	12%
6	3%

Figure 2: Type and Percent of traumatic events reported in the year prior to incarceration



Conclusion

Treating trauma for incarcerated individuals may be important to increase their chances of success upon release from jail, including improving well-being, community stability, and decreasing the odds of re-engaging in crime. Sixty-nine percent of the sample discussed in this report had a notable traumatic experience within the year prior to incarceration at the county jail, 77% of which experienced more than one traumatic event, and 56% of which experienced at least three traumatic events. Research has found that trauma oftentimes leads to substance use disorders and mental health problems such as major depression, heightened anxiety, and psychosis.²¹ There is a disproportionate number of people with substance use disorders and mental health problems that are incarcerated.²²⁻²³ Providing trauma treatment in community settings for those experiencing post-traumatic symptoms is an important mechanism for preventing later behavioral health problems. Although causality has not yet been established, some research finds correlations between untreated trauma symptoms and criminal justice involvement²⁴.

Research is needed to find out whether traumatic events in the year prior to incarceration are related to arrest and incarceration at the county jail. Future research should begin to determine whether experiencing a traumatic event causes arrest and incarceration. This can potentially be done by understanding the relationship between individuals' first traumatic event and incarceration, or by understanding from the participants what happened in the year prior to incarceration after experiencing the traumatic event(s). For example, did the traumatic experience lead to substance use problems and/or mental health problems related to arrest and incarceration? Understanding this definitively will help practitioners develop trauma-informed programs that can be used preventatively in the community to avoid incarceration or county jails to help treat trauma and related problems with the goal of successful reentry back to the community.

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