“Hit, kicked, slapped, bit, raped”: Trauma, Intimate Partner Violence, and HIV Risk Among Incarcerated African American Women in North Carolina

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Background

• HIV disproportionately affects African American women in the Southeastern U.S. ¹⁻³
• For reasons not completely understood, women who have been in prison carry a greater lifetime risk of HIV. ⁴
• HIV is five times as prevalent among incarcerated African American (AA) women in North Carolina (NC) as among their unincarcerated AA counterparts. ⁵,⁶
Background
Trauma, Women, and HIV

• Sexual and physical abuse are important contributors to sexual risk behavior and specifically HIV risk. 7-9

• Childhood sexual abuse (CSA), intimate partner violence (IPV), and resulting psychological trauma play a central role in the lives of incarcerated HIV-positive and at-risk women. 10-12
Methods

- Parent study designed to explore the differences in HIV risk factors between HIV-positive and HIV-negative women in prison in NC.
- Audiotaped qualitative interviews conducted with 29 AA women (15 HIV-positive, 14 HIV-negative) by two interviewers.
- Interviews explored potential pre-incarceration HIV risk factors on multiple levels.
- Participants were interviewed within three months after entry into the NC prison system.
## Results

### Participant characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HIV-positive (n=15)</th>
<th>HIV-negative (n=14)</th>
<th>Total (n=29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean age in years (range)</strong></td>
<td>37.8 (24-60)</td>
<td>29.9 (19-41)</td>
<td>34.0 (19-60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants born in NC</strong></td>
<td>12 (80%)</td>
<td>13 (93%)</td>
<td>25 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean number prior NC incarcerations (range)</strong></td>
<td>3.8 (1-9)</td>
<td>1.9 (1-8)</td>
<td>2.9 (1-9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean years of school</strong></td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Completed 12th grade or GED</strong></td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
<td>12 (86%)</td>
<td>20 (69%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Total (n=29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood sexual abuse (CSA)(^1)</td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
<td>9 (64%)</td>
<td>17 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate partner violence (IPV)</td>
<td>9 (60%)</td>
<td>9 (64%)</td>
<td>18 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPV with &gt;1 partner</td>
<td>5 (33%)</td>
<td>4 (29%)</td>
<td>9 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPV and CSA</td>
<td>4 (27%)</td>
<td>6 (43%)</td>
<td>10 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other sexual violence(^2)</td>
<td>7 (47%)</td>
<td>3 (21%)</td>
<td>10 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other nonsexual violence</td>
<td>4 (27%)</td>
<td>6 (43%)</td>
<td>10 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional sex ever</td>
<td>10 (67%)</td>
<td>4 (29%)</td>
<td>14 (48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crack cocaine use ever</td>
<td>13 (87%)</td>
<td>5 (36%)</td>
<td>18 (62%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Defined as unwanted sexual experiences under the age of 18  
2. Non-IPV, non-CSA sexual violence
A 48-year-old HIV-positive woman

“Hit, kicked, slapped, bit, raped— all of it. I think if you name it, I’ve been it. ... I grew up being abused, so after a while, you get sort of kind of used to it. It’s like a pattern. It seem like, in my life, that’s all I attract, abusive men. ... I never had nobody nice to me growing up. I never had nobody did anything for me.”
Lifelong violence: A 33-year-old HIV-positive woman

“Whenever I was at my mom’s house – whenever I did stay the night there ...[her boyfriend] would just – it was always touching and ... I was very young at that time, and the last time he molested me, I was nine.”

“Yeah, and I got raped one time in Myrtle Beach by three guys. I think I was about 13 then.”

“And, again, when I was 13, I met this [33-year-old] man, and I lived with him for two years. And I didn’t know that he was paying my mom in drugs at the time for her not to call the police.”

• Childhood sexual abuse
• Betrayal and abuse at the hands of adults and caregivers
• Older partners
Lifelong violence:
A 33-year-old HIV-positive woman

- Substance abuse
- Transactional sex
- Betrayal and abuse at the hands of adults and caregivers
- Older partners
- Intimate partner violence

“I ran away and went to this lady’s house ... I just felt very alone, and I ended up gettin’ high. I had money, and she was an addict ... she started bringin’ guys to the house ... And she’d always tell me, “You don’t have to do nothin’,” ... But one time, it didn’t work, and I ended up gettin’ raped, and I never did that again.”

“I was 17. He was 35, and drugs were involved ... crack cocaine and alcohol, and I don’t even remember why we used to fight ... I looked like the elephant woman.... as soon as my face healed, I left him.”
Results: CSA

• CSA was reported by 59% of women in this cohort, with repeated episodes of unwanted sexual contact prior to age 18 reported by many.

• Consistent themes included substance use by parents or caretakers, much older partners, and unsuccessful attempts to report abuse or establish protection from attacker.
“And my mama owed [him] some money, and [he] raped me. And when I told my mother she didn’t believe me. And my daddy, he didn’t believe me either; they said that I was lying. And I wasn’t lying; he really did.”

“Yeah my mama, she was on drugs and I felt like she had let people touch us for drugs ... You know she was just high to the point and she’d leave us in the room. And men would come in there and stuff.”
Results: IPV

• Intimate partner violence (IPV) was common among both HIV-positive and HIV-negative women with 9 women enduring both CSA and IPV.
• Many suffered repeated violence and life-threatening injuries from partners or caregivers.
• Many participants described few alternatives to these situations given limited economic means and social support.
Results: Lifelong Violence

• Most women described a lifetime marked by traumatic violence and abuse and expressed a desire to process these experiences.

• Illegal drug use starting at a young age contributed to women’s experience of violence/abuse
  – Drugs were used as a coping mechanism in surviving traumatic events.

• Crack cocaine use was especially pervasive among the HIV-positive group.

• Transactional sex (TS) work (sex for money, drugs, or survival) was closely linked to crack cocaine use, particularly among the HIV-positive women.

• Both crack use and TS presented opportunities for violence in the lives of these women.
Conclusions

• The legacy of trauma was significant and pervasive in this vulnerable population of HIV-positive and HIV-negative women.

• Prison represents an opportunity for specific trauma screening in a high-risk population to break this cycle.

• The intersection of lifetime trauma with substance abuse and lack of agency and economic power underscores the need for integrated interventions in this population to decrease HIV risk and improve community health.
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References


References


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