

Characteristics of Prison Sexual Assault Targets in Male Oklahoma Correctional Facilities

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Research on male inmate sexual assault has been quite limited in correctional literature. Even fewer of these studies have focused specifically on the characteristics of sexual assault targets. Therefore, data gathered from August 1998 to May 1999 via face-to-face interviews with 174 inmates in three male Oklahoma correctional facilities were drawn on to examine various demographic and organizational characteristics of prison sexual targets. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their vulnerability to threatened and/or completed forced sexual assault encounters with other inmates. Roughly 14% of the inmates reported that they had been sexually targeted by other inmates.

Keywords: *inmate sexual assault targets; inmate sexual coercion; inmate-to-inmate sexual assault*

American prisons have long been seen as a necessary, but problematic, aspect of society and the criminal justice system in particular. Although few would argue that (at least some) criminals need to be sanctioned for their behaviors, criticisms of the way that sentences are determined, how institutions are structured and administered, and the conditions and environments in which inmates are held have been common. *Corrections* is widely viewed as a classic misnomer. Due in large part to the manner in which inmates are housed, treated, and maintained—and evidenced by recidivism rates reaching 80%—rehabilitation may be a goal but is rarely achieved. If American society has any intention of addressing this issue, it is of critical importance to begin by examining both the physical and social conditions of our prisons.

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In an effort to address this need, the present research focuses on prison culture as it pertains to inmates' sexuality, specifically the presence of sexual violence in American prisons.

The topic of male sexual coercion in correctional facilities has generally been ignored by social scientists. At the time of his writing, Dumond (1992) found that only nine studies had examined the incidence of pressured or coerced sex in male prisons. Three other studies have been published since that time (Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, & Bennett, 1995; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, & Donaldson, 1996). Even fewer of these studies have examined the characteristics of male prison sexual assault targets. The purpose of the current study is to ascertain demographic and organizational characteristics of sexual assault targets.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the pioneering studies on male sexual coercion was administered by Davis in 1968. He conducted a 26-month study of sexual coercion in the Philadelphia jail system. Of 3,304 inmates interviewed, 97 (or 4.7%) reported having been sexually assaulted, either during transport to and from court or while incarcerated. A total of 156 documented assaults were reported (including attempts). Davis believed that the numbers reported were only the "tip of the iceberg" (p. 11). He felt the actual number of assaults over the 26-month period was closer to 2,000. With this assumption, Davis concluded that more than 60% of those interviewed had actually been sexually assaulted but neglected to report it.

Moving forward, and attempting to assess who among the inmate population was most vulnerable, Carroll (1977) examined the demographic correlates of male sexual victimization in correctional facilities. Using 21 inmate and staff informants, Carroll estimated that "75% or more of the sexual assaults involved black aggressors and white victims" (p. 420). Carroll attributed this Black-on-White aggressive behavior to slavery and the legacy of racism. Carroll further explained that "black rage" against White male-dominated correctional systems intensified the number of such assaults. Carroll argued that Black-on-White sexual assaults were acts of revenge and retaliation for countless years of oppression by White male-dominated society.

Like Carroll (1977), Toch (1977) also examined characteristics of inmates involved in sexual assault. A random sample of five maximum-security correctional facilities for men yielded 418 completed interviews with inmates. Through these interviews, Toch noted that Blacks were more likely to be

aggressors and Whites more likely to be targets of sexual aggression. He also attributed the Black-on-White aggressive behavior to White domination and oppression of Blacks. However, Toch contended that regardless of race, the strength or weakness of a sexual target would determine if an inmate fell prey to sexual victimization.

Lockwood's (1980) research focused on whether commonalities existed in the characteristics of potential targets of sexual assault. He conducted interviews with inmates considered to be potential targets in three New York State prisons for men. The sample of those inmates considered "targets" was drawn from inmate records, results of a random survey, and "by any means possible" (p. 2). Of the 107 targets who participated in the study, only 1 reported being victimized. However, 28% reported being a target of sexual aggression at least once during their incarceration. Approximately half of the Whites in the sample were targets, while about a fifth were Black or Hispanic. In addition, Lockwood found that targets weighed an average of 15 pounds less than their aggressors.

Chonco (1989) provided a descriptive study of victims of sexual assault. Using data collected from 40 inmates in a Midwestern state prerelease center, he argued that victims of sexual assault often exhibited behaviors associated with female stereotypes. In addition, victims were often younger, talked a lot to other inmates to fit in, and were perceived as weak by other inmates. Characteristics that increased an inmate's chances of victimization included youth and attractiveness, whether this was the first imprisonment experience for the offender, if the inmate belonged to any prison gangs, and whether the inmate displayed fear.

In addition to race and other characteristics, sexual orientation has also been linked to sexual victimization. Wooden and Parker (1982) conducted a comprehensive study of inmate sexual experiences in a medium-security prison for men in California. Of 200 completed questionnaires, 14% of the sample indicated that they had been sexually victimized. In all, 41% of the homosexuals, 9% of the heterosexuals, and 2% of the bisexuals had been victimized. Unfortunately, Wooden and Parker's sample was overrepresented by "effeminate homosexuals" and "vulnerable heterosexual youngsters" (p. 9). In other words, the California Department of Corrections used this particular prison as a place to house known homosexuals, a common practice of the 1980s.

Nacci and Kane (1984) also reported a relationship between sexual orientation and sexual assault. Three hundred and thirty inmates were randomly selected and surveyed from 17 federal correctional institutions. They found that 70% of self-acknowledged homosexual/bisexual inmates had been targets of sexual assaults. They further argued that "since homosexual/bisexual

identification and insertee roles are associated, the target must be perceived as one who is (or may be) willing to occupy passive female roles" (p. 47). However, more than 65% of heterosexual inmates had also been targeted. Targets of sexual aggression were more likely to be White and young and to have been in the institution less than 1 month prior to their attacks.

Some scholars have noted that the fear of sexual assault is as much of a concern in prisons as the actual sexual assault. In 1989, Tewksbury followed up on previous research on sexual assault by focusing on the fear of prison sexual assault. He studied 150 male inmates in a correctional facility in Ohio and reported that 7.4% indicated that someone had approached them in a sexually threatening manner. However, no inmate reported being sexually assaulted. In all, 40% of Whites and 25% of non-Whites were sexually threatened. In addition, these inmates were younger than 30 years of age and smaller in stature. Regarding the fear of sexual assault, he discovered that taller inmates possessed less fear of being sexually assaulted. However, an unexpected finding was that heavier inmates, or those with larger frames, feared sexual assault more than the physically smaller inmates.

Smith and Batiuk's (1989) study also examined the fear of sexual assault in relation to inmate behaviors. In alignment with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, Smith and Batiuk claimed that inmates performed for those around them to portray desired characteristics. "In prison. . . one's performance is everything. It is all that stands between being left alone to do your time and becoming a victim" (p. 37). The inmates who gave poor performances and were perceived as feminine by other inmates were most often the victims of sexual assault. Smith and Batiuk argued that the actual existence of sexual assault was irrelevant; rather, "It is the fear of victimization which ultimately shapes and colors inmate interaction" (p. 37).

More recent studies have limited their focus to the rate of sexual assault occurrences in correctional facilities. Saum et al.'s (1995) study focused on sexual activities occurring in a medium-security prison in Delaware. Inmates were asked about experiences of sexual assault that they had experienced, were aware of, or had witnessed in the prison. Of 101 male inmates interviewed, 3% reported having witnessed one rape, and 1% reported witnessing two rapes. Only 1 male inmate in the sample reported being raped during a previous incarceration. However, an additional 5 inmates reported that another inmate had attempted to rape them while incarcerated.

In 1996, Struckman-Johnson et al. examined the incidence rates of sexual coercion in the Nebraska state correctional system. From a sample of 474 men, they reported that 22% had been forced or pressured to have sex with another inmate. Victims reported encountering sexual confrontations an

average of nine times during their sentence. The victims' ages ranged from 26 to 36 years. White inmates represented 80% of the targets of sexual coercion; however, they constituted only half of the prison population. Bisexual inmates were also overrepresented in the target sample compared to the general population. In addition, a greater percentage of the target sample were incarcerated for sex offenses. And 55% of the perpetrators were acquaintances with the victims, while 53% were strangers.¹

Following up on their previous study, Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (2000) conducted the most comprehensive study to date of sexual coercion in correctional facilities. From surveys of 1,788 male inmates in seven Midwestern prisons, 21% had been sexually pressured or sexually assaulted at least one time while in prison in their present state. In addition, 16% had been sexually threatened or assaulted, and 7% reported being raped in their present facility. Of the 7% who admitted to being raped in their current facility, 4% of the incidents had occurred within 30 months of their incarceration. In addition to frequency of occurrence, various characteristics of the victims and correctional facilities were documented. The majority (60%) of the victims were White. Facilities with the highest sexual coercion rates had commonalities including larger prison populations, more lenient security, and barrack style housing.

Sexual assault and the fear of sexual assault remain a constant concern for prison inmates and important influences on institutional culture. Correctional administrators implement disciplinary action against inmates discovered engaging in sexual activity. However, some instances of sexual activity are coerced, and inmates suffer long-term ramifications. As Tewksbury (1989) stated, "Individuals who are sexually assaulted suffer from both physical and psychological trauma, seriously impeding efforts toward rehabilitation and eventual community reintegration" (p. 62). The purpose of the current study is to examine the characteristics of male sexual assault targets to provide correctional administrators and staff with information that will be valuable in maintaining the safety of the prisoners within their facilities.

METHOD

Participants

Between August 1998 and May 1999, a total of 300 inmates (100 inmates from a minimum-, medium-, and maximum-security facility in Oklahoma) were randomly selected and invited to participate in a study of sexual behav-

iors within prisons. Only 58% ($n = 174$) of invited inmates elected to participate in the study. Using face-to-face interviews, data were gathered from inmates within each of the security levels (minimum $n = 52$, medium $n = 61$, and maximum $n = 61$).

A comparison of the general population of the three prisons and the research sample reflected some differences. For example, White inmates (38.5%) were underrepresented in the sample of minimum-security inmates as compared to the general population of the institution (52.4%). Native Americans (19.2%) were overrepresented in the sample of minimum-security inmates as compared to the general population of the facility (7.7%). White inmates (47.5%) were underrepresented in the sample of medium-security inmates as compared to the general population (53.9%). In addition, White inmates (45.9%) were underrepresented in the sample of maximum-security inmates as compared to general population (55.3%). The mean age of the sample was 39 years for minimum, 36 years for medium, and 33 years for maximum. These closely approximate the mean age for each institution (37, 36, and 33, respectively). Fully one half of the sample had never been married, with only 22.4% of the sample currently married. More than 27% of the sample was legally divorced or widowed.

Interview Instrument

As part of the research process, a 44-item interview instrument was constructed, in part, using a combination of previous researchers' questions and scales regarding consensual inmate sex and inmate sexual coercion (Saum et al., 1995; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996; Tewksbury, 1989). For the purpose of the current study, demographic information including race, marital status, build, and sexual orientation was gathered. Incarceration-related variables were also gathered, including type of offense committed and security level of respondents. Finally, information was gathered on whether respondents had been sexually threatened and/or sexually assaulted, with additional information requested on the length of time after respondents were incarcerated that they were first sexually threatened/assaulted, respondents' age when it first occurred, the race of the perpetrator, the number of times it occurred, and the relationship of the target to the perpetrator (stranger versus known). If an inmate admitted to being sexually threatened and/or sexually assaulted, they were categorized as targets of sexual assault. Of the nearly 14% of inmates who had been sexually threatened, only 2 reported that they had been raped.

Procedures

Inmates who agreed to participate in the study were informed by the first author that a voluntary interview would be administered. They were told that the nature of the research was very sensitive and, thus, they might experience some emotional discomfort during the interview process. Furthermore, inmates were told not to provide their name or any identifiers during the interview to maintain confidentiality. Institutional authorities did, however, impose two important restrictions on the process. Interviews were limited to a maximum of 30 minutes each, and audio recording of interviews was prohibited. This meant that analysis was restricted, and direct quotes from inmates were unable to be included in the results.

RESULTS

Of the 174 inmates interviewed, 24 inmates (13.8%) reported being sexual targets, and 2 inmates (1.1%) were also victims of sexual assault during their incarceration. A comparison of the interview sample and targets of sexual assault highlighted some interesting disparities between the two groups (see Table 1). On the issue of race, 58% of sexual assault targets were White as compared to only 44% of the interview sample. However, a lower percentage of African Americans (29%) reported being targets of sexual assaults as compared to the sample (39%).

Concerning marital status, approximately 66% of targets were single as compared to 50% of the interview sample. Interestingly, the interview sample and the targets had similar builds. However, this was not the case for their sexual orientations. Roughly 42% of the targets were heterosexual as compared to more than 78% of the interview sample. In addition, bisexuals comprised 13% of the interview sample but made up 42% of the targets. Type I offenders were also more likely to be represented in the target group than the interview sample. Finally, 46% of the targets were housed in a maximum-security level prison (where they are on lockdown for 23 hours a day) as compared to 30% of the interview sample.

In addition to these results, information was also specifically gathered on targets of sexual assaults. For example, the average age of targets was 20.5 years with a median age of 18.5 years. In addition, targets were incarcerated an average of 143 days before the first sexual encounter. Most (88%) targets reported being threatened only once, with 1 reporting two threats and 2 reporting three or more sexual threats. The race of the 40 perpetrators was

TABLE 1: A Comparison of the Interview Sample ($n = 174$) and Targets of Sexual Assault ($n = 24$)

	<i>Interview Sample (%)</i>	<i>Targets of Sexual Assaults (%)</i>
Race		
White	44.3	58
African American	39.1	29
Native American	13.2	8
Hispanic	3.4	5
Marital status		
Single	50.0	66
Divorced	27.6	21
Married	22.4	13
Build		
Small frame	25.0	29
Average frame	45.0	42
Large frame	30.0	29
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual	78.8	42
Bisexual	13.2	42
Homosexual	8.0	16
Type of offense committed		
Type I (excluding sex offenses)	50.0	71
Other offenses	38.0	21
Sex offenses	12.0	8
Security level		
Maximum	29.9	46
Medium	35.1	46
Minimum	35.1	8

also disclosed by the targets, with 6 victims claiming multiple perpetrators during different incidents. The racial makeup of the perpetrators was White (38%), African American (58%), and Hispanic (4%). Of these 40 occurrences, 85% of the perpetrators were strangers to the targets.

DISCUSSION

Compared to previous research conducted in the 1990s, the results of this study have shown that inmate sexual target rates are relatively low. Because of the lack of an agreed on definition of sexual assault, previous studies have continued to show great disparities in the rates of inmate-on-inmate sexual assault. With the exception of this study, however, when researchers have

broadened the definition of sexual assault to include threats, larger rates have been obtained. For instance, Lockwood (1980), in his study of 107 inmates, found that only 1 inmate had been sexually assaulted, but 28% reported being targets of sexual aggression. In addition, Nacci and Kane (1984) found that of 330 inmates, 70% of homosexual/bisexual inmates and 65% of heterosexual inmates had been the targets of sexual aggression. Wooden and Parker (1982), on the other hand, found that homosexuals were four times more likely to be victimized than heterosexuals. Interestingly, we found that 84% of the targets were either heterosexual or bisexual, while the remaining 16% were homosexual.

In addition to our research, other studies have shown that African Americans are more likely than Whites to perpetrate cases of sexual threats and/or sexual assaults (Bowker, 1980; Carroll, 1977; Scacco, 1975; Toch, 1977) and less likely to be victims of such threats and/or assaults (Bowker, 1980; Carroll, 1977; Moss, Hosford, & Anderson, 1979; Scacco, 1975; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996; Tewksbury, 1989; Toch, 1977).

One area of research within the study of inmate sexual assaults that has consistently yielded the same results is the age of targets. Younger inmates are more likely to be targets of sexual assaults than any other age group within correctional facilities (Chonco, 1989; Nacci & Kane, 1984; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996; Tewksbury, 1989). Data from the present study revealed the mean age of sexual assault targets was 20.5 years old. On average, the first sexual threat occurred within 4.5 months of incarceration. Similarly, Nacci and Kane (1984) found that targets of sexual assaults had been in the institutions less than 1 month prior to their assaults. Struckman-Johnson et al. (1996) uncovered that 55% of the perpetrators were acquaintances with the victims. However, our data revealed that only 15% of the targets knew their perpetrators.

With the exception of Tewksbury's (1989) study, the majority of sexual assault research has found that victims of sexual coercion are small in stature (Chonco, 1989; Lockwood, 1980; Smith & Batiuk, 1989; Toch, 1977). We, however, found that inmates with heavier bodies (larger frames), not always lighter bodies (smaller frames), may also be targets of sexual assault. Tewksbury argued that individuals "who perceive themselves as overweight correspondingly perceive themselves as less able to defend themselves from possible approaches or assaults of a sexual nature. Those inmates of lower weight may feel better able to protect themselves from sexual assaults" (p. 69).

Unfortunately, prison sex researchers have not ventured into other demographic characteristics of sexual assault targets. We found, for example, that

the majority of targets in our sample were single, resided in either medium- or maximum-security facilities, and were convicted of Type I offenses (excluding sex offenses). Struckman-Johnson et al. (1996), however, found that a greater percentage of the target sample was incarcerated for sex offenses.

In addition to the definitions of sexual assault and inconsistencies within the different demographic and organizational variables, there are limitations in the design used in prison sex research. The two most common designs used are self-administered surveys and face-to-face interviews. Studies by Herrick (1991) and Ryan (1990) report that approximately 60% to 75% of U.S. prison inmates are illiterate. Some studies have failed to account for illiteracy when conducting self-administered surveys. Conversely, face-to-face interviews may also result in the underreporting of incidents of sexual victimization. The topic of sexual assault is sensitive; thus, inmates may be embarrassed to discuss the topic with interviewers (Smith & Batiuk, 1989). However, when conducting face-to-face interviews, researchers are able to gain trust through interaction with the respondents. Therefore, researchers who gain access to inmates and are able to use this approach should be commended for their efforts.

CONCLUSION

This study provides many important policy implications for research on sexual aggression in prisons. Institutional segregation of inmates who have been sexually victimized, inmates that may have characteristics that would make them likely targets, or inmates who are known aggressors or who have strong characteristics of an aggressor may greatly reduce sexual victimization within correctional facilities. At one point, it was believed that isolating known homosexuals would curtail sexual assault victimization within correctional facilities (Wooden & Parker, 1982). However, it was realized that any inmate regardless of sexual orientation can be a participant (either target or aggressor) in sexual victimization. This type of segregation proved ineffective and was abandoned by most correctional facilities.

In addition, inmates have often requested protective custody because of sexual pressure or sexual assault. Protective custody, in many institutions, consists of several hours of lockdown, loss of privileges, and removal from prison activities (i.e., church, educational programs, movies, work, classes). Steps should be taken by administrative officials for inmates in protective custody to maintain the same rights and privileges that would be given if they remained in the general population (Chonco, 1989; Dumond, 1992; Lock-

wood, 1980; Smith & Batiuk, 1989; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Wooden & Parker, 1982).

Furthermore, all correctional officers must complete some type of training before entering a prison. Instruction concerning aspects of sexual victimization could be added as part of the curriculum. Once on duty, continued vigilance of inmate movement (surveillance camera and patrolling) should be enforced. Those officers working in classification should take notice of potential targets and aggressors, as well as note those inmates who have previously been sexually victimized while in the system and house them accordingly. Inmate orientation should also include sessions by staff and inmates that address sexual victimization issues.

Correctional administrators, staff, and inmates entering prison face many concerns today including overcrowding, HIV/AIDS, and gang activity. The fear of sexual assault remains a concern for inmates and staff, although scholars have largely ignored this topic. For both scholars and practitioners to truly fulfill their mission in corrections, we must address these issues in research and provide correctional administrators and staff with the tools needed to maintain the safety of everyone in our prisons.

NOTE

1. Due to victims' reporting multiple perpetrators, percentages added to more than 100%.

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