

Examining the Characteristics of Male Sexual Assault Targets in a Southern Maximum-Security Prison

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Studies concerning inmate-on-inmate sexual assaults within male correctional facilities are sparse in the sociological and correctional literatures. Only a few studies have specifically examined the characteristics of male inmate sexual assault targets. The current research sought to address this gap by providing an examination of factors related to victimization likelihood. Using data gathered in March 2000 from 142 inmates (18% return rate) in one Southern maximum-security prison, the authors examined demographic and behavioral characteristics of male inmate sexual targets. Based on inmates' self-reports of sexual victimization—threatened and/or forced sexual assault encounters—correlates of victimization were identified. Approximately 18% of the inmates reported inmate-on-inmate sexual threats, and 8.5% reported that they had been sexually assaulted by another inmate while incarcerated.

Keywords: *sexual assault; prison rape; maximum-security prison; profile of inmate sexual assault targets*

The study of prison sexuality actually began in the 1930s (Fishman, 1934). A former inspector of U.S. federal prisons, Fishman (1934) wrote, “The voluminous literature concerning American prisons is not only sparse when it comes to deal with this [the] important subject of sex, but has evaded its discussion as much as possible” (p. 5). This statement still continues to have validity 70 years later. In fact, the issue of prison sexuality has largely been

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disregarded by social scientists, correctional administrators, and society alike. Tewksbury and West (2000) went so far as to say that

research on sex in prisons is controversial, often neglected, and fairly scarce in the field of criminal justice, because sex in prison is not a "clean," "easy," or "safe" topic . . . such an approach, however, is misinformed and potentially perilous for the continued theoretical and substantive development of the discipline. (p. 368)

Ignoring prison sexuality also has serious consequences for inmates, especially in relation to sexual violence within prisons. Although described as a cancer [that] has gone untreated, prison sexual violence has been the focus of very few sociological or correctional studies in the past 70 years (Kunselman, Tewksbury, Dumond, & Dumond, 2002, p. 27). Sexual assaults in prisons have been associated with increased institutional violence (Cotton & Groth, 1982; Fleisher, 1989; Lockwood, 1980), health risks (Blumberg, 1989; Cotton & Groth, 1982; Gido, 1989), and victims that become victimizers (Chonco, 1989; Lockwood, 1980; Smith & Batiuk, 1989). Unfortunately, although some of the classical works devote time to describing characteristics of sexual assault targets (see Donaldson, 1993), few of the empirical studies on prison sexual assaults have examined the microlevel (demographic and behavioral) correlates of these victims (i.e., sexual assault targets). It is important to understand which inmates are at a greater risk of being sexually threatened and/or assaulted by other inmates. By understanding these characteristics, correctional administrators have the necessary knowledge to protect possible victims from this predatory behavior. Therefore, the goal of the current study was to extend and update the current knowledge on inmate sexual assault targets by examining their demographic and behavioral characteristics in hopes that it will shed new light on this continuing problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the first studies of male inmate sexual assault was conducted by Davis in 1968. He supervised a 26-month study of inmate sexual assault in the Philadelphia jail system. In addition to inmate interviews, Davis conducted comprehensive reviews of inmate records and administered polygraph tests to inmate victims and witnesses to such attacks. Of the 3,304 inmates interviewed, 97 reported being sexually assaulted, either while incarcerated or during transport to and from court. A total of 156 documented attempted or completed sexual assaults were reported by the victims. Davis

(1968) postulated that these numbers were only the tip of the iceberg (p. 11). In fact, he believed the actual number of sexual assaults during the research period was closer to 2,000. With this estimation, Davis concluded that 60% of those interviewed had actually been sexually threatened or assaulted but neglected to report these incidents to either corrections officials or to the researcher.

Through observation, Carroll (1977) attempted to assess the demographic and social correlates of sexual assault, specifically the victims' and perpetrators' race, of 200 male inmates in a prison. Although Carroll did not personally observe any acts of sexual assault, interviews with 21 inmate and staff informants revealed an estimated 40 interracial sexual assaults per year. Carroll attributed this violence to the legacy of slavery and racism. He postulated that Black perpetrators on White victims were acts of revenge and retaliation for the countless years of oppression by the White male-dominated society. Carroll (1977) further believed that Black rage against the White male-dominated correctional system increased the incidence and prevalence of sexual assaults. His research laid the foundation for other social scientists to examine the interracial nature of prison sexual assaults, which later became one of the most strongly established correlates of prison sexual assaults.

By randomly interviewing 418 inmates from five separate maximum-security prisons, Toch (1977) also found that Blacks were more likely to be the perpetrators of sexual assaults and Whites were more likely to be the victims. Similar to Carroll (1977), Toch also attributed these Black-on-White sexual assaults to White domination and oppression. However, Toch (1977) argued that regardless of race the perceived strength or weakness of a sexual target could determine if an inmate became a sexual assault victim.

Rather than focus on inmates' self-reported sexual assaults, Moss, Hosford, and Anderson (1979) interviewed correctional officers regarding this topic at a federal correctional facility that housed 1,100 inmates. The respondents revealed that only 1% (12 inmates) were sexual aggressors. All of the assailants were either Black or Chicano with all but two of their victims being White. It was noted, however, that in all cases of sexual assault, the aggressor and victim were of different races.

In 1980, Lockwood (1980) further extended the study of demographic characteristics of potential sexual assault targets. By using inmate records, a random survey, and by any means possible, Lockwood (1980) identified 107 inmates considered so-called sexual targets who were housed in three male New York State prisons (p. 2). Of the targets, only one of the interviewed inmates reported being sexually victimized. However, 28% of the entire sample reported being a target (i.e., sexually threatened) at least once during their

incarceration. Fifty-one incidents of sexual assault and 97 incidents of less aggressive behavior were disclosed by the 30 inmates who self-identified as targets. Approximately one half of the self-identified targets were White, while about one fifth were Black and one fifth were Hispanic.

Although race has been a significant correlate in sexual assault studies, sexual orientation has also been a characteristic that researchers have identified as important. By conducting a study of prison sexuality within a California medium-security prison for men, Wooden and Parker (1982) were two of the first researchers who examined homosexual victims of inmate sexual assault. Of the 200 inmates who responded to questionnaires, 14% indicated that they had been sexually assaulted while incarcerated. In all, 2% of the bisexuals, 9% of the heterosexuals, and 41% of the homosexuals reported being sexually assaulted by other inmates.

Nacci and Kane (1984) also examined the relationship between sexual orientation and sexual assault by randomly surveying 330 inmates from 17 federal correctional institutions. Results revealed that 70% of homosexual and bisexual inmates had been sexual assault targets. The researchers believed 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 (Nacci & Kane, 1984, p. 47). Targets were also more likely to be White, young, and reside in their current facility less than 1 month prior to their attacks.

Using a descriptive case study of 40 inmate sexual assault victims and sexual assault perpetrators housed in a midwestern state prerelease center, Chonco (1989) reiterated previous research that had presented Black inmates as aggressors and added that homosexual inmates could also become sexual assaulters. However, Chonco contended that victims of sexual assault often exhibited behaviors associated with female stereotypes, while at the same time also arguing that all inmates were equally vulnerable to sexual assaults within the facility. Sexual assault victims tended to be younger, attractive, members of prison gangs, perceived as weak by other inmates, and fearful.

In 1989, Tewksbury focused on the fear of inmate sexual assault. His study included 150 male inmates in an Ohio correctional facility. More than 7% of the inmates reported that someone had approached them in a sexually threatening manner. However, no inmate reported being sexually assaulted. Forty percent of Whites and 25% of non-Whites were sexually threatened. Targets were also younger than age 30 years and smaller in stature.

Recent studies have limited their focus to the rate of sexual assault occurrences in prisons. Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, and Bennett (1995) examined the sexual activities of 101 Delaware inmates in a male medium-security prison. Inmates were questioned about their own experiences of sexual assault as

well as those that they had knowledge of or had witnessed in prison. One inmate reported being sexually assaulted during a previous incarceration, while an additional 5 inmates reported that another inmate had attempted to sexually assault them while incarcerated. Three percent of the sample reported witnessing a sexual assault, and 1% reported witnessing two sexual assaults.

By surveying 474 male inmates, Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, and Donaldson (1996) examined the incidence rates of sexual coercion in the Nebraska state correctional system. Of the sample, 22% had been forced or pressured to have sex with another inmate (i.e., sexually coerced). Victims reported encountering sexual confrontations an average of nine times during their sentence and ranged in age from 26 to 36 years. White inmates accounted for 80% of the sexual targets but constituted only one half of the prison population. Bisexual inmates and sex offenders were also overrepresented in the target sample as compared to the general population.

In 2000, Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson conducted the largest sample study of sexual coercion in correctional facilities. Data gathered from 1,788 male inmates in seven midwestern prisons revealed that 21% of inmates had been sexually pressured or sexually assaulted at least once (i.e., sexually coerced). The majority (60%) of the sexual targets were White. Of those who admitted to being sexually assaulted in their current facility, 4% had been raped within the most recent 26 to 30 months of incarceration.

In the most recent study of inmate sexual assault, Hensley, Tewksbury, and Castle (2003) examined the characteristics of sexual assault targets in three male Oklahoma correctional facilities. Roughly 14% of the 174 inmates interviewed reported that they had been sexually targeted by other inmates. Concerning race, 58% of the targets were White as compared to only 44% of the interview sample. Of the targets, 29% were African American as compared to 39% of the interview sample. Almost two thirds of the targets were single as compared to 50% of the sample. It is interesting to note that 42% of the targets described themselves as heterosexual as compared to 78% of the interview sample. Inmates who had committed Type I offenses (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004) were more likely to be represented in the target group than the interview sample. On average, targets were incarcerated for almost 5 months before their first threatening sexual approach. The racial makeup of the perpetrators was White (38%), African American (58%), and Hispanic (4%).

Sexual assault is a concern for prison inmates and, as previously discussed, should be an important issue for debate among social scientists, correctional administrators, and society. Unfortunately, the dearth of data prevents our understanding of this significant topic. The purpose of the current

study is to uncover and update the demographic and behavioral characteristics of male sexual assault targets so that we can provide corrections officials with useful and current information that may be key to maintaining the order, safety, and security of the inmates within their prisons. In addition, this is the first study of sexual targets that actually examines male inmates' sexual orientations prior to and during incarceration as correlates. This issue may be crucial in understanding the sexual dynamics of prisons and how threats of and completed sexual assaults influence an inmates sexual identity.

METHOD

Participants

In March 2000, all inmates housed in one maximum-security Southern correctional facility for men were requested to participate in a study of sexual behaviors. Of the 800 inmates incarcerated at that time, a total of 142 agreed to participate in the study, yielding a response rate of 18%. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the prison population and the sample. A comparison of the prison population and the study group revealed some differences. Black inmates were underrepresented in the sample as compared to the prison population; whereas, inmates who described themselves as other (American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic) were overrepresented in the sample. Statistical analyses revealed significant differences between the prison population and sample for respondents who indicated that they were Black or other. Therefore, caution should be taken when interpreting the results. The mean age for the sample was 33 years as compared to 32 years for the prison population, indicating no significant difference.

Survey Instrument

A 46-item questionnaire was constructed, in part, using a combination of previous researchers questions and scales regarding consensual inmate sex and inmate sexual coercion (Hensley et al., 2003; Saum et al., 1995; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996; Tewksbury, 1989). For the purpose of the current study, demographic information including age, race, marital status, and sexual orientation prior to incarceration (i.e., Before you were incarcerated, how would you characterize your sexual orientation?) and during incarceration (i.e., How would you characterized your sexual orientation today?) was collected. Respondents were also asked what type of offense (personal, property, sex, or other) that they had committed. Finally, information was

TABLE 1: Population and Sample Characteristics

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Prison Population</i>		<i>Sample</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Race				
White	552	69.0	96	67.6
African American	220	27.5	29	20.4
Other	28	3.5	17	12.0
Mean Age:	32 years		33 years	

collected on whether respondents had been sexually threatened and/or sexually assaulted (i.e., Since you have been incarcerated, has another inmate threatened to sexually assault you? and Since you have been incarcerated, has another inmate sexually assaulted you?), with additional information requested on the length of time after respondents were incarcerated that they were first sexually threatened and/or assaulted, the race of the perpetrator, and the number of times it occurred. If an inmate admitted to being sexually threatened and/or sexually assaulted, he was categorized as a target of sexual assault. Of the 26 inmates who had been sexually threatened, 12 reported that they had been raped.

Procedures

After obtaining approval from the state Department of Corrections and traveling to the facility, inmates were assembled in the main area of their respective units by correctional staff so that the researchers could explain the contents of the surveys. Correctional counselors then distributed self-administered questionnaires to each inmate for completion at a later time. Inmates were asked to return their completed questionnaires in a stamped, self-addressed envelope within 2 weeks of distribution. Inmates were told it would take approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. In addition, the cover letter reiterated their anonymity while participating in the project. No incentives were given for completion of the survey.

RESULTS

Of the 142 inmates who responded to the survey, 26 inmates (18.3%) reported being sexual targets and 12 inmates (8.5%) were also victims of sexual assault during their incarceration. According to Table 2, the mean age for

the sexual assault targets was 34 years, while the sample's mean age was 33 years. Concerning race, 73.1% of sexual assault targets were White as compared to 67.6% of the sample. Slightly more than 23% of targets were African American as compared to 20.4% of the sample. According to chi-square tests, significant differences did not emerge between the study sample and targets of sexual assault with regard to race.

Regarding marital status, approximately 58% of targets were single as compared to 57% of the sample. Again, chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences between the sample and the targets with regard to marital status. Roughly 50% of the targets described themselves as heterosexual prior to incarceration as compared to more than 78% of the sample. In addition, self-identified bisexuals prior to incarceration made up 15.5% of the sample but made up 38.5% of the sexual targets. Significant differences between the sample and targets of sexual assault emerged with regard to sexual orientation prior to incarceration ($\chi^2 = 16.17, p .01, df = 2$). When asked their sexual orientation during incarceration, 69% of the sample identified as heterosexual; however, only 42% of the targets identified as heterosexual. Furthermore, self-identified bisexuals during incarceration constituted 26.0% of the sample but made up 46.2% of the sexual targets. Again, significant differences between the sample and targets of sexual assault emerged with regard to sexual orientation during incarceration ($\chi^2 = 11.04, p .01, df = 2$). Respondents who had committed personal crimes were also more likely to be represented in the target group than the interview sample. According to chi-square tests, significant differences did not emerge between the study sample and targets of sexual assault with regard to type of crime committed.

Targets were incarcerated an average of 2 months prior to their first sexual encounter. The majority (92.3%) of targets reported being threatened only once, with two inmates reporting two sexual threats. The racial makeup of the alleged 27 perpetrators was White (25%) and African American (75%).

DISCUSSION

Similar to previous research, the rate of sexual victimization reported in the current study shows that a significant minority of inmates are targeted for sexual threats and assaults, and approximately one half of those sexually threatened are, in fact, sexually assaulted by another inmate. However, the current study's results offer an important advance over previous assessments of prison sexual assaults in that rather than simply focusing on the incidence of sexual assaults and descriptive statistics summarizing the characteristics of victims and/or aggressors, we offer insights regarding personal char-

TABLE 2: A Comparison of the Sample (N = 142) and Targets of Sexual Assault (n = 26)

	<i>Study Sample (%)</i>	<i>(n)</i>	<i>Targets of Sexual Assaults (%)</i>	<i>(n)</i>
Race				
White	67.6	96	73.1	19
African American	20.4	29	23.1	6
Other	12.0	17	3.8	1
Marital status				
Single	57.0	81	57.7	15
Divorced	26.8	38	30.8	8
Married	16.2	23	11.5	3
Sexual orientation prior to incarceration				
Heterosexual	78.9	112	50.0	13
Bisexual	15.5	22	38.5	10
Homosexual	5.6	8	11.5	3
Sexual orientation during incarceration				
Heterosexual	69.0	98	42.3	11
Bisexual	26.0	37	46.2	12
Homosexual	5.0	7	11.5	3
Type of offense committed ^a				
Personal	47.1	65	61.5	16
Property	13.0	18	15.5	4
Sex	13.0	18	11.5	3
Drug	5.1	7	3.8	1
Other	21.7	30	7.7	2

NOTE: a. Four missing cases.

acteristics, including self-identified sexual orientation prior to and during incarceration, associated with an increased risk of being sexually targeted by other inmates.

What stands out in these results is the fact that sexual orientation is clearly an important factor in an inmates risk of being targeted for sexual approaches and/or assaults. Fully one half of the sexual targets so identified in the current study identified as bisexual or homosexual prior to entering prison, and 57% of targets so identified during their incarceration. Previous studies have strongly suggested that perceived vulnerability is a major predictor of possible sexual targeting. This position is supported in these findings. In the hyper-masculine environment of a maximum-security Southern prison, an identity other than fully heterosexual is perceived as a sign of femininity and weakness. As such, it should be expected that bisexual and gay self-identified

inmates would be at a greater risk of being targeted for sexual approaches and assaults. This idea is yet further supported by the finding that targeted inmates were first approached in a sexually threatening manner after being incarcerated an average of only 2 months. Weakness and vulnerability are assessed on arrival in prison, and clearly these inmates were quickly identified and selected for targeting.

Chi-square analyses revealed that significant differences were present between the study sample and targets of sexual assaults with regard to sexual orientation prior to and during incarceration. Eigenberg (1992) suggested that sexuality, especially in prisons, is fluid, and sexual orientations may change at different times and in different circumstances. Sagarin (1976) discovered that the 4 inmates he interviewed who had been sexually assaulted and subdued into homosexuality in prison continued the pattern and pursued it in their post-prison years (p. 254). Thus, it is important for correctional administrators and staff to understand the sexual dynamics of prison life (see also Hensley, Wright, Tewksbury, & Castle, 2003).

It is also interesting to note that the longstanding findings in the literature of interracial targeting for sexual assaults remain nearly 25 years after the initial presentation of most inmate sexual aggressors being African American and most targets being White. This finding is even more notable considering that the population of the institution in question and the research sample is two thirds White.

These findings present some clear policy and practical implications for corrections officials. Specifically, inmates who enter prison with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual should be provided with resources to enhance their abilities to avoid or resist sexual threats. These resources may come in a variety of forms, including education, classification, and housing assignments geared to minimize opportunities for encountering potential aggressors in vulnerable situations. In addition, psychosocial supports (from staff, volunteers, and/or other inmates) are needed to enhance self-esteem and/or interactional skills should be provided to navigate potentially dangerous situations.

Although the current study has clear policy implications, it is not without its limitations. First, the findings are based on an 18% response rate and must be interpreted with caution. It is possible that selection bias could have well influenced the respondents willingness to complete the survey. Therefore, it is theoretically conceivable that a larger number of inmates were sexually threatened or assaulted than found in the current study. Future researchers should use a combination of face-to-face interviews and questionnaires to more accurately assess the rate of sexual assault. Personal interviews, for example, typically result in underreporting of sensitive information

(Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996) but allow for enhanced rapport with the respondents. Anonymous surveys protect the respondents, potentially allowing more accurate reporting of sexual victimization (Eigenberg, 1994), but restrict the strategies to obtain greater participation (Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996).

In the end, it is the responsibility of all corrections officials to provide a safe and humane environment in which all inmates are housed in environments where they are free from criminal and violent victimizations. Sexual violence is only one form of assault for which corrections officials need to be aware and work for elimination. However, sexual violence may also be the most serious form of violence to which inmates may be exposed, and the form of violence that may carry with it the most serious and long-lasting implications.

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