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Inmate-to-Inmate Sexual Coercion in a Prison for Women

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ABSTRACT Inmate-to-inmate sexual coercion remains a relatively unexplored topic within correctional literature, especially concerning female inmates. Using data gathered in March 2000 via questionnaires with 245 inmates in a southern female correctional facility, the authors examine various demographic characteristics of victim and perpetrator inmate-to-inmate sexual coercion. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their victimization and/or perpetration of threatened or completed forced sexual assault encounters with other inmates. Over four percent of the inmates reported that they had been sexually coerced by other female inmates and two percent had sexually coerced another inmate. Policy implications are also addressed in the study. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS Female sexual coercion, female inmates, prison sex

Historically, the topic of sexual coercion in correctional facilities has received much more academic attention than consensual same-sex sexual activity (Hensley, Tewksbury, & Castle, 2003; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2002; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, & Donaldson, 1996; Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, & Bennett, 1995; Tewksbury, 1989; Nacci & Kane, 1984, 1983; Wooden & Parker, 1982; Lockwood, 1980; Bowker, 1980; Sagarin, 1976; Scacco, 1975). Saum et al. (1995) suggested that the attention to consensual same-sex activity may be due to the nature of the sexual acts themselves. Accordingly, "consensual sex is seen as less of a threat to inmate or institutional security than rape and thus does not demand the attention of more violent behavior" (p. 415). However, both areas of research continue to remain virtually unexplored. The general lack of research on sexual coercion in male and especially female correctional facilities may be due to a variety of reasons, including lack of knowledge about the problem, lack of understanding regarding the nature of sexual coercion, and prejudice toward inmates as deserving victims (Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996).

Sexual coercion and consensual same-sex research within correctional facilities are, however, very important to study. Prison administrators gain valuable knowledge of inmate relationships beyond sexual activities through research on consensual sex. Such endeavors typically investigate the frequencies and motivations of sexual behavior and can aid correctional officials in preventing a wide range of inappropriate behaviors. Administrators also benefit from research on coerced sexual activity by gaining a broader understanding of how and why inmates attack fellow inmates sexually, which in turn enables officials to safeguard against violence within the prison facility.

Not much is known about the frequency and motivations of sexual aggression in correctional environments. Therefore, it is important to do more extensive research on the subject to aid administrative officials in attempting to eliminate the problem. It is important to point out that while the topic of inmate-to-inmate male sexual coercion in correctional facilities receives the majority of the small amount of attention from researchers, there is even less known about the frequency of inmate-to-inmate sexual coercion within female correctional facilities. Therefore, more research should focus on the issue of sexual coercion in general, but even more so inside women's prisons. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to assess the characteristics of female inmate victims and inmate offenders of coerced sexual activity within a prison. In

other words, we focus specifically on inmate-to-inmate female sexual coercion. We do not discuss staff-to-inmate sexual coercion.

SEXUAL COERCION IN MALE CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

The scant research completed regarding the topic of coerced sexual activity makes it difficult to fully discern the magnitude of sexually aggressive behavior within correctional facilities. Although the research on the topic of sexual coercion in male correctional facilities is limited, the existing literature does provide some insights regarding sexual coercion.

Davis (1968) conducted a 26-month study of sexual coercion in the Philadelphia jail system. Of 3,304 inmates interviewed, 97 (or 4.7%) admitted to being sexually assaulted while incarcerated or during transport to and from court. Those who admitted to having been sexually assaulted reported a total of 156 documented assaults (including attempts). Davis (1968) believed the reported numbers to be only the “tip of the iceberg” (p. 11). He considered the actual number of assaults during the 26-month period to be closer to 2,000. This assumption declares that over 60% of those interviewed actually had been sexually assaulted, but refused to report it.

More recent research regarding sexual coercion in male correctional facilities tends to reveal a much lower percentage of inmates being victimized than Davis’ early claims. Lockwood (1980), for example, conducted interviews with inmates considered to be targets of sexual coercion in New York State male prisons. The “target” sample was drawn from results of a random survey, access to inmate records, and “by any means possible” (p. 2). Of the 107 inmates who participated in the study, only one reported being victimized.

Wooden and Parker (1982) found that 14% of their sample of 200 male inmates in a California prison had been sexually victimized. Nine percent of heterosexuals, 41% of homosexuals, and two percent of bisexuals within the sample were assaulted. Wooden and Parker’s research suggested a higher rate of sexual coercion within correctional facilities than previous studies. In regard to other studies, it is important to point out that many researchers feel that there is substantial underreporting in regard to sexual coercion. This underreporting is due, perhaps, to inmates fearing possible repercussions from reporting the act, or the institution and officials’ unwillingness to report such instances, thereby having their facility perceived as unsafe for inmates. Addi-

tionally, the research design used in the study may result in underreporting. Anonymous surveys yield higher rates of sexual coercion than face-to-face interviews.

Nacci and Kane (1984, 1983), in their study of 17 federal prisons, found that only two of 330 inmates interviewed reported being sexually assaulted. They also discovered that only two percent of the respondents reported anyone attempting to pressure them to have sex against their will. Tewksbury's (1989) study found rates similar to those reported in previous studies. He surveyed 150 male inmates in a correctional facility in Ohio and reported that seven percent indicated that someone had approached them in a threatening sexual manner. However, no inmate reported being sexually assaulted.

Since 1990, there have only been four studies conducted on the issue of sexual coercion in men's prisons (Hensley, Tewksbury, & Castle, 2003; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996; Saum et al., 1995). The existence of only four studies in the past ten years supports the argument that research on sexual coercion is neglected by social scientists. Saum et al. (1995) discovered that only one of the 101 male inmates interviewed in a medium security prison in Delaware had been sexually assaulted. An additional five inmates reported that another inmate had attempted to rape them while incarcerated.

Struckman-Johnson et al. (1996) completed a study of sexual coercion in the Nebraska state prisons. They surveyed a sample of 474 male inmates and discovered that 22% had been pressured or forced to have sex against their will. Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (2000) completed the most comprehensive study of sexual coercion in ten Midwestern correctional facilities. Twenty-one percent of the 1,788 male respondents in the sample indicated that they had encountered at least one instance of sexual coercion while incarcerated.

The most recent study on sexual coercion in a male correctional facility focused on the characteristics of sexual assault targets. Hensley et al. (2003) conducted face-to-face interviews with 174 inmates in three Oklahoma correctional facilities. Of those interviewed, 13.8% of the inmates reported being victims of sexual threats during their incarceration. However, only two completed rapes were reported. In addition, only two inmates admitted to sexually threatening and/or assaulting another inmate. Targets were more often heterosexual or bisexual, white, young, had heavier bodies (larger frames), and housed in medium or maximum security institutions.

**SEXUAL COERCION
IN FEMALE CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES**

Limited academic research exists addressing the issue of sexual coercion in male correctional facilities. Even fewer studies acknowledge sexual coercion in female correctional facilities and, although many studies have been conducted on the sexual coercion of women in community settings, until 1996 no research existed on the topic of sexual coercion in female prisons.

Struckman-Johnson et al.'s (1996) study provided the first public data on sexual coercion among women in a correctional setting. Previous research on sexual coercion in prisons used personal interviews with inmates as the research method. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, the researchers contended that this method resulted in underreporting. Therefore, an anonymous survey was administered to staff and inmates in one women's midwestern state prison. Of the 42 women who participated, only three women reported that they had been pressured or forced to engage in sexual activities. The women reported that the incidents involved included genital touching or attempts at sexual contact. The perpetrators of these incidents included single and multiple female inmates, as well as multiple male staff.

Although the sample size was too small to make generalizations, this study provided some valuable information to researchers regarding sexual coercion in female correctional facilities. The women in this facility were forced to engage in less severe acts of sexual coercion, including attempts at contact or genital touching. The rate of sexual coercion among women in this prison was moderately low and the researchers suggested that factors contributing to this low incident rate may have reflected the smaller size of the prison.

Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson's (2002) conducted a larger and more comprehensive study of sexual coercion in those midwestern correctional facilities for women. A total of 263 inmates responded to the survey. Rather than describing the activity, inmates in this study were asked whether they had experienced any incidents of sexual coercion. The researchers used "sexual coercion" as a general term to describe any unwanted sexual contact brought about by pressure or force, including attempts at touching, touching of genitals or sexual parts, oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse. Reported incident rates in these three facilities varied from 6% to 19%. Inmates reported that 45% of incidents of sexual coercion involved staff. In nearly all (11/12) of those incidents, staff members were the primary perpetrators and other in-

mates were not involved. This suggests that in these particular women's facilities, sexual coercion by staff occurs almost as often as sexual coercion by inmates.

Variations in sexual coercion rates may be due to institutional differences such as: administrations, management of problems with sexual coercion, temporary incarceration of inmates with a background of serious crimes, and different types of housing that may facilitate sexual coercion (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000). However, due to the sensitive nature of sexual coercion and the limited research on the subject, underreporting incidents of sexual coercion remains an obstacle. More research on this subject is needed before generalizations can be made regarding the prevalence of sexual coercion in female correctional facilities. Thus, the purpose of this study is to assess the characteristics of victims and perpetrators of inmate-to-inmate sexual coercion in a female correctional facility.

METHODS

Subjects

In March 2000, all inmates housed in a southern correctional facility for women were requested to participate in the current study. Inmates were assembled in the main area of their respective units by correctional staff in order that the researchers could explain the contents of the surveys. The lead researcher and a graduate assistant then distributed self-administered questionnaires to each inmate. Inmates were told it would take approximately 30 minutes to complete the 46-item questionnaire.

Because of the sensitive nature of the study, the Institutional Review Board required that the researchers not provide an informed consent form to the respondents so that complete anonymity could be achieved. Rather, a cover letter was provided with each survey that clearly stated that some discomfort may occur because of the sensitive nature of the survey. If they did experience discomfort, the respondents were told to contact either the prison psychologist or the lead researcher. (However, none chose to do so.)

Inmates were asked to return their completed questionnaires in a stamped, self-addressed envelope within two weeks of distribution. Inmates were also told not to sign their name or provide any identifiers on the survey or the envelope. No incentives were given for completion of the survey. Of the 643 inmates incarcerated at that time, a total of 245

agreed to participate in the study, yielding a response rate of 38%. Although these response rates may appear low, most prison studies dealing with sensitive topics attract response rates at or below the 25% mark (Hensley, Rutland, & Gray-Ray, 2000).

A comparison of the racial composition, age distribution, and security classification of the respondents and the facility population revealed no significant differences. Thus, the sample appears to be representative of the prison population.

Measures

Demographic characteristics (age, race, marital status, and educational level) were recorded for the study group. Data were also collected on the sexual orientation of the victims and perpetrators of sexual coercion (prior to and during incarceration), number of incidents of inmate-to-inmate sexual coercion (including period of time it occurred after incarceration), and race of the victims and perpetrators.

RESULTS

Victims of Sexual Coercion

Out of the 243 female inmates surveyed, 11 inmates (4.5%) reported incidents of sexual coercion. Demographic characteristics of age, race, marital status, and education level were reported by 10 of the victims. According to Table 1, the ages of the victims ranged from 23 to 47 with 33.9 years representing the mean age. The victims' reported their race as Caucasian (60%), African American (20%), Native American (10%), and other (10%). Inmates reported their marital status as single (40%), divorced (40%), and married (20%). The victims' education levels varied from 8th grade or less (10%), some high school (10%), high school (10%), some college (40%), and completed college (30%). The victims also disclosed the race of their perpetrators as African American (64%) and Caucasian (36%).

All 11 victims responded to the questions regarding their sexual orientation both prior to and during incarceration. Prior to incarceration, 82% of the victims identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual and 18% as bisexual. The results of the question on sexual orientation during incarceration revealed some changes among the victims. Forty-five percent

□ **TABLE 1: Characteristics of Inmate-to-Inmate Sexual Assault Victims and Perpetrators**

Characteristics	Victims (n)	Perpetrators (n)
Average Age	33.9 years (10)	32.6 years (5)
Race:		
Caucasian	60% (6)	20% (1)
African American	20 (2)	60 (3)
Native American	10 (1)	20 (1)
Other	10 (1)	0
Marital Status:		
Single	40% (4)	20% (1)
Married	20 (2)	20 (1)
Divorced	40 (4)	60 (1)
Education:		
8th Grade or Less	10% (1)	40% (2)
Some High School	10 (1)	40 (2)
High School	10 (1)	0
Some College	40 (4)	20 (1)
Completed College	30 (3)	0
Race of Perpetrator (Victim)		
African American	64% (7)	40% (2)
Caucasian	36 (4)	60 (3)
Sexual Orientation Prior to Incarceration:		
Heterosexual	82% (9)	60% (3)
Bisexual	18 (2)	40 (2)
Homosexual		
Sexual Orientation During Incarceration:		
Heterosexual	45% (5)	20% (1)
Bisexual	45 (5)	40 (2)
Homosexual	10 (1)	40 (2)
Incidents Occurred:		
After a Few Days	10% (1)	0%
Two Weeks	27 (3)	40 (2)
Two Months	27 (3)	40 (2)
One Year	36 (4)	20 (1)

of the victims identified their sexual orientation as heterosexual, 45% as bisexual, and 10% as homosexual.

The incidents of sexual coercion took place at various times throughout the victims' sentence. Some incidents occurred after a few days (9%), two weeks (27%), two months (27%), and a year (37%) after their

initial incarceration. Overall, twelve incidents of sexual coercion were described by the victims, with one inmate revealing two incidents. All of the sexual assaults that were uncovered during this study were perpetrated in one-on-one scenarios rather than gang rapes.

Perpetrators of Sexual Coercion

Of the 243 respondents, five women (2%) admitted perpetrating incidents of sexual coercion against another inmate. The demographic characteristics of all perpetrators were also recorded in Table 1. Their ages ranged from 25 to 44 with 32.6 years representing the mean age. The perpetrators' reported their race as African American (60%), Caucasian (20%), and Native American (20%). Inmates reported their marital status as divorced (60%), single (20%), and married (20%). The education levels of the perpetrators varied from 8th grade or less (40%), some high school (40%), and some college (20%). The race of the victims was disclosed by the perpetrators as African American (40%) and Caucasian (60%).

All of the perpetrators answered the questions regarding sexual orientation prior to and during incarceration. The prior sexual orientation of the perpetrators was identified as heterosexual (60%) and bisexual (40%). However, the sexual orientation of some of the perpetrators changed during their incarceration. The perpetrators identified themselves as bisexual (40%), homosexual (40%), and heterosexual (20%).

The incidents of sexual coercion were perpetrated at different times during the sentence of the offender. These incidents occurred from a couple of weeks (40%), two months (40%), to one year (20%) after incarceration.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the rates of sexual coercion were relatively low for this women's correctional facility. The rates in this facility were lower than those found in the two previous studies on sexual coercion in female correctional facilities conducted by Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (2002) and Struckman-Johnson et al. (1996). However, this study focused only on inmate-to-inmate sexual assault. The two previous studies also included staff-to-inmate sexual assault.

Due to the limited amount of research conducted on sexual coercion in female correctional facilities, it is difficult to ascertain the exact rates of assault in female prisons. Less than half of the female inmates incarcerated in this facility agreed to participate in the study. Therefore, sexual coercion rates may be higher than reported. Additionally, under-reporting is common due to the sensitive nature of the research. Inmates may be embarrassed to discuss the topic or fear repercussions from staff or other inmates for reporting incidents of sexual coercion (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Smith & Batiuk, 1989; Wooden & Parker, 1982; Moss, Hosford, & Anderson, 1979).

The study of sexual aggression in prison provides several important policy implications for administrators. First, facilities should provide more adequate surveillance and staff for institutional blind-spots, including shower rooms, dorm facilities, etc. Second, providing conjugal visits to inmates may possibly reduce violence, including sexual assaults in the institutions (Hensley et al., 2000). Finally, profiling victims and perpetrators will prove beneficial in educating inmates and staff regarding the issue of sexual assault in prison.

Although most academic research on sexual coercion has focused on male correctional facilities, sexual assault and aggression is also a concern for female inmates. Correctional administrators are responsible for the safety of the staff and inmates within their facility. However, scholars must address these issues in research and provide correctional administrators and staff the tools that are necessary in maintaining the safety of everyone in our prisons.

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