

## **Fact Sheet – Trauma History and Conditions of Confinement for Incarcerated DV Survivors**

When domestic violence survivors experience incarceration, they are often highly triggered by the prison environment, which in many ways mimics their past experiences of abuse.

### **Victimization and Trauma Histories of incarcerated Women**

The rates at which incarcerated women have previously been victimized are significantly higher than those of women not incarcerated.

#### **Sexual Assault Data**

- 70% had been sexually assaulted<sup>1</sup>
- up to 86% had been sexually assaulted as girls<sup>2</sup>

#### **Physical Assault Data**

- 84.6% reported a history of abuse in adult relationships<sup>3</sup>

#### **Multiple Victimizations**

- 43% experienced *all four* types of victimization studied, i.e. physical assault as children and as adults, and sexual assault as children and as adults<sup>4</sup>

#### **Trauma<sup>5</sup>**

- Trauma is any emotional, mental or physical stress that results in lasting psychological or physical symptoms.
- Domestic and sexual violence are severely traumatic experiences.
- Complex PTSD (or complex traumatic stress reaction) is the consequence of a history of repeated (or multiple) traumatic experiences, such as childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence.

### **Trauma and Incarceration**

Prison is very likely to be the site of new traumatic exposure. Routine correctional practices such as pat-downs or strip searches (particularly cross-gender), an environment of total control, frequent discipline and threats of, or actual, physical or sexual aggression are likely to exacerbate previous trauma and increase trauma-related behaviors and symptoms.

Reminders of abuse are known as triggers because they “trigger” the same emotional reactions survivors experienced when they were being abused. Prisoners are reminded of past abuse as they “walk on eggshells” to avoid making authority figures angry, when their activities are completely

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<sup>1</sup> McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2008, p. 1120. This was a study of 391 incarcerated women in Ohio. Additional findings included that 11.5% had been gang raped

<sup>2</sup> Bradley and Davino, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Kubiak, Trauma Informed Corrections

controlled, or when they are being ridiculed or criticized. Triggers can originate from either staff or other prisoners. (Women of color may be particularly vulnerable to punitive behavior from guards.<sup>6</sup>)

#### **Common Trauma Triggers in Prison<sup>7</sup>**

- Pat downs, particularly cross-gender pat downs
- Strip searches
- Dental and medical care—particularly gynecological exams
- Lack of privacy—viewing by staff of dressing, bathing, toileting
- Daily control by correctional staff—being told what to do and when to do it
- Dependency on another for survival
- Threats of physical and/or sexual aggression toward prisoner by prisoners or staff
- Physical and/or sexual aggression toward prisoner by prisoners or staff
- Slamming of doors by staff
- Staff jingling of cuffs
- Staff banging on bed while prisoner is asleep
- Staff turning on lights while prisoner is asleep
- Staff or prisoners yelling, screaming in prisoner's face
- Staff or prisoners calling prisoner names; making demeaning remarks to prisoner

#### **Common Reactions to Trauma Triggers<sup>8</sup>**

- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability/angry outbursts
- Fear, panic, agitation
- Lashing out
- Becoming easily startled
- Feeling constantly on guard
- Using substances
- Shutting down
- Responding violently to a perceived threat

#### **Summary**

Incarcerated women have been physically and sexually victimized at a much higher rate than woman who are not incarcerated. When women enter prison, they bring their personal histories of trauma exposure, and are very likely to experience additional trauma and triggers while incarcerated.

**Submitted by: The Ohio Domestic Violence Network**

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<sup>6</sup> Bhattacharjee, Whose Safety? Women of Color and the Violence of Law Enforcement

<sup>7</sup> MCADSV Best Practice Toolkit for Working with Domestic Violence Survivors with Criminal Histories

<sup>8</sup> MCADSV Best Practice Toolkit for Working with Domestic Violence Survivors with Criminal Histories