

# Ethnic Differences in the Relationship Between Trauma and Mental Health

## Among the Incarcerated

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### ABSTRACT

Mental health problems are prevalent, especially among the incarcerated. Many incarcerated individuals develop mental health problems due to their trauma history and experiencing stressful life events. This secondary analysis assessed cross-sectional data from the “Criminal Justice Drug Abuse Treatment Studies (CJ-DATS): The Criminal Justice Co-Occurring Disorder Screening Instrument (CJ-CODSI), 2002-2008 [United States]”. The current study included participants (N=322) who were adult inmates from four different locations and various backgrounds. This study revealed that one’s arrest rate was associated with anxiety during the lifetime and suicide attempts. Additionally, race was a significant factor in the relationship between being physically, sexually, and emotionally abused and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and attempts. One important implication from the current study is the importance of programs that focus on preventing trauma and providing culturally competent services, especially for People of Color, as they were more impacted by the effects of trauma on their mental health.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Significance of the Study

- According to Henry (2020), abuse and other adverse experiences impact mental health and substance use disorders which also contribute to the increase in crime and incarceration.

#### Purpose of Research

- The purpose of this study will be to examine the ethnic differences in the effects of trauma on the mental health of incarcerated adults.

#### Research Question

- What is the difference in the impact of trauma on mental health among incarcerated White folks and incarcerated People of Color?

#### Hypothesis

- The study hypothesizes a difference in the impact of trauma between incarcerated White folks and incarcerated People of Color.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Mental Health Among the Incarcerated

- Trauma exposure increases the possibility of developing mental health problems and receiving treatment for it in adulthood (Wolff & Shi, 2012; Wolff et al., 2014).
- Substance use disorders, depression, and psychotic disorders are also prevalent among the incarcerated (Drapalski et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2020; Wolff & Shi, 2012).

#### Ethnic Differences in the Impact of Trauma on Mental Health

- White inmates were more likely to report experiencing a traumatic event like disasters or accidents (Carlson & Shafer, 2010; Haugebrook et al., 2010). On the other hand, American Indians reported more alcoholism and child deaths, while African Americans reported sexual trauma and mental illnesses.
- Black individuals have a relatively higher risk for deprivation but not violence, whereas White individuals have a higher risk for experiences marked by violence (Henry, 2020).

#### Systems Theory

- This theory allows providers and researchers to look holistically at a client’s conditions and environmental factors to understand their issues and hardships better.

#### Gaps and Limitations

- There is currently a fair amount of research on different factors that contribute to incarceration and gender and age differences on the impact of trauma on mental health for the incarcerated. However, there is a gap in the literature towards ethnic differences in the effect of trauma on mental health among incarcerated folks.

### METHODS

#### Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

- The current study was a secondary analysis of the data from the “Criminal Justice Drug Abuse Treatment Studies (CJ-DATS): The Criminal Justice Co-Occurring Disorder Screening Instrument (CJ-CODSI), 2002-2008 [United States] (ICPSR 27963)”.
- The original study’s research design used surveys to collect data by interviewing subjects.
- Data was collected by interviewing participants through a variety of surveys through interviews.

#### Sample and Sampling Method

- The original study’s sampling frame and design used a convenience sample from prison-based substance abuse treatment programs.
- Participants were drawn from the four locations to ensure that women and minorities were included and to be more representative.
- This current study’s final sample size was 322 participants instead of 324. This was due to encountering two outliers in which there was an extremely high amount of number arrests for 2 of the participants which the current study took out.

#### Measures

- Trauma was assessed with four single items: the number of times the participant was arrested throughout their lifetime, age at first time in jail, and the age at first arrest through a scale. The fourth single item that also measured trauma was whether the participant was physically, sexually, or emotionally abused in the past six months.
- Mental health was assessed with four single items. The first single item that measured mental health was whether they experienced serious depression in their lifetime for two weeks or more at a time. The second single item was whether they experienced serious anxiety/tension in their lifetime. The third single item that also measured mental health was whether they have experienced serious thoughts of suicide in their lifetime. The fourth single item was whether they have experienced suicide attempts in their lifetime.

#### Mann-Whitney Test

- The number of times arrested was significantly higher for those who endorsed anxiety (Mean rank = 174.74) than for those who did not (Mean rank = 146.56; U=14781.50, p=.006).
- The number of times arrested was significantly higher for those who had suicide attempts (Mean rank = 184.39) than for those who did not (Mean rank = 154.97; U=7810.00, p=.039).

#### Chi-Square Test

- A chi square test was calculated comparing the frequency of mental health problems among those who were abused or not abused, as shown in Table 2.
- A significant association was found for those who were physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abused in the past 6 months and thoughts of suicide ( $\chi^2(1)=16.84$ ,  $p<.001$ ), while a Phi statistic suggested a moderate relationship (.23). Figure 1 summarizes these findings visually.
- When taking race into account, a significant association was found for those who were physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abused in the past 6 months and thoughts of suicide. The relationship between abuse and thoughts of suicide was weak (Phi = .165) but significant among Whites ( $\chi^2(1)=4.677$ ,  $p=.031$ ). Among nonwhites, the same relationship was significant ( $\chi^2(1)=13.391$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with moderate strength (Phi = .317).

Table 1

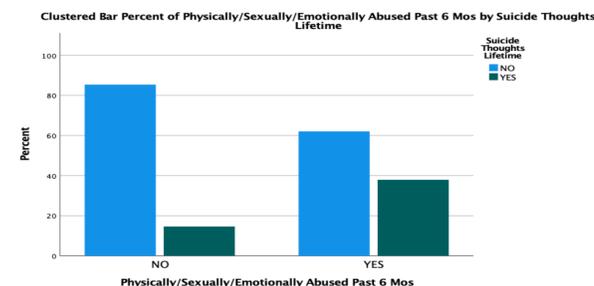
Sample Characteristics of Participants (N=322)		
Characteristic	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	214	66.5
Female	108	33.5
<b>Service Type</b>		
Therapeutic Community	238	73.9
Intensive Outpatient	84	26.1
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White	173	53.7
African American	58	18.0
Native American	12	3.7
Other	65	20.2
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Never Married	127	39.4
Legally Married	77	23.9
Living as Married	32	9.9
Separated	20	6.2
Divorced	60	18.6
Widowed	5	1.6
<b>Employment Past 6 Months</b>		
Employed Full Time	134	41.6
Employed Part Time	45	14
Unemployed, Looking for Work	22	6.8
Unemployed, Disabled	18	5.6
Unemployed, Retired	1	0.3
Unemployed, Not Looking for Work	84	26.1
Unemployed, in School	1	0.3
Homemaker	4	1.2
Other	13	4.0

### RESULTS

Table 2  
Prevalence of Mental Health Problems among Abused Incarcerated Individuals by Race

Participant Groups	Mental Health Problems % (f)							
	Depression	No Depression	Anxiety	No Anxiety	Suicide Thoughts	No Suicide Thoughts	Suicide Attempts	No Suicide Attempts
<b>White</b>								
Not Abused	49.6 (69)	50.4 (70)	51.1 (71)	48.9 (68)	17.3 (24)	82.7 (115)	14.4 (20)	85.6 (119)
Abused	65.6 (21)	34.4 (11)	62.5 (20)	37.5 (12)	34.4 (11)	65.6 (21)	28.1 (9)	71.9 (23)
<b>Nonwhite</b>								
Not Abused	36.9 (41)	63.1 (70)	32.4 (36)	67.6 (75)	12.6 (14)	87.4 (97)	11.7 (13)	88.3 (98)
Abused	77.3 (17)	22.7 (5)	68.2 (15)	31.8 (7)	45.5 (10)	54.5 (12)	36.4 (8)	63.6 (14)

Figure 1  
Suicide Thoughts in Lifetime Among Those Physically/Sexually/Emotionally Abused in the Past 6 Months



### DISCUSSION

#### Major Findings

- There were significant relationships between the number of times arrested and lifetime anxiety and the relationship between the number of times arrested and suicide attempts in their lifetime.
  - This appears consistent with previous research that arrests and incarceration in jail are common experiences for those with serious mental illnesses (Becker et al., 2011).
- Additionally, significant relationships between physical, sexual, and emotional abuse with depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and suicidal attempts with an additional layer of race were found.
  - When assessing the relationship between abuse and mental health problems, Nonwhite incarcerated individuals had a significant relationship between the two but not among White incarcerated individuals.
  - White inmates were more likely to report traumatic and larger scale events such as natural disasters compared to Nonwhite inmates who reported more micro and interpersonal traumatic events such as abuse (Carlson & Shafer, 2010; Haugebrook et al., 2010).
- The relationship between abuse and suicidal thoughts were significant among both White and nonwhite groups.
  - This is consistent with previous research in that sexual and physical trauma were risk factors in an individual having suicidal thoughts (Favril et al., 2020).

#### Strengths and Limitations

##### Strengths

- Diverse demographic information
- Helped fill the gap in current literature around ethnic differences around impact of trauma

##### Limitations

- Small sample size
- Potential bias due to participants self-report

#### Implications for Research and Practice

- Trauma and mental health problems are prevalent among the incarcerated. Therefore, this vulnerable population must receive the mental health treatment they need to heal and move forward with their lives. According to Clements-Nolle et al. (2009), inmates with mental health problems receive treatment the year before an arrest, and only a third receive treatment after being detained. This reinforces the importance of implementing quality mental health services to meet the needs of the incarcerated.
- It is crucial to further investigate differences in the impact of trauma on ethnically diverse incarcerated individuals since everyone has a different background and worldview.
- Moreover, mental health providers who work in the criminal justice system must have culturally sensitive interventions for minorities while considering macro-level issues and systemic issues that minorities may face.

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