

# The Relationship Between Mental Health and Sexual Assault Among Female Inmates

Kimberly Rojas  
Department of Social Work

## ABSTRACT

- Female inmates who are diagnosed with mental health disorders and experienced sexual abuse make up most of the state prisons, federal prisons, and local jails, but only a third of the offenders receive treatment.
- The present study focused on the relationship between mental health disorders and sexual assault among female prison inmates and if mood disorders and anxiety disorders were prevalent among female inmates who have experienced sexual assault compared to those that haven't.
- The sample used for this study was ( $n=2,930$ ) female inmates.
- The purpose of this study is to address the gap concerning sexual abuse and mental health amongst the female inmate population, so clinicians can provide interventions, advocate for resources in jails, and provide support programs.

## INTRODUCTION

- Female inmates have very high exposure to different traumas, especially sexual abuse (Kowalski et al., 2020).
- Sexual abuse can profoundly affect women physically, socially, and psychologically (Dumond, 2000 & Green et al., 2005)
- These effects are significantly magnified when women are incarcerated (Kowalski et al., 2020).
- "What is relationship between mental health disorders and sexual assault among female prison inmates?"
- "Are mood disorders and anxiety disorders more prevalent among female inmates who have experienced sexual assault compared to those that haven't?"
- It is hypothesized that female inmates who have experienced sexual abuse are more likely to experience mental health problems.
- It is also hypothesized that sexually assaulted female inmates will more likely experience mood or anxiety disorders compared to inmates who have not been sexually assaulted.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- Approximately 1 in every 6, or 17.7 million American women have been victims of rape or some form of sexual abuse (Heath et al., 2013).
- Whether experiencing sexual assault before incarceration or during, the likelihood of female inmates having the repercussion of having a mental illness is high (Cook et al., 2017).
- A meta-analysis states that 74% of female offenders had a diagnosis of a mental illness compared to 26% universal female population (Johnson et al., 2012).
- Mental health disorders can cause the victim to enter an endless cycle of traumas and crime unless their mental health disorders are treated.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

- The current study is a secondary analysis of the data from Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISCF), 2004.
- The purpose of the original cross-sectional study is to provide data on inmates who are incarcerated in state and federal prisons (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004).
- The study collected data regarding to the inmate's personal characteristics such as their demographics, income, highest education level, sexual assault history, mental illness disorders, treatment programs and services (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004).

### Sampling Method

- The sample file obtained was from "BJS 2000 Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities" which consisted of 1,549 State facilities.
- The current study is a subsample of the female inmates within the sample to measure the relationship between sexual assault and mental health disorders. Male inmates from the original study were removed ( $n=15,659$ ) and the current study was left with a sample size of ( $n=958$ ) female inmates.

### Measures

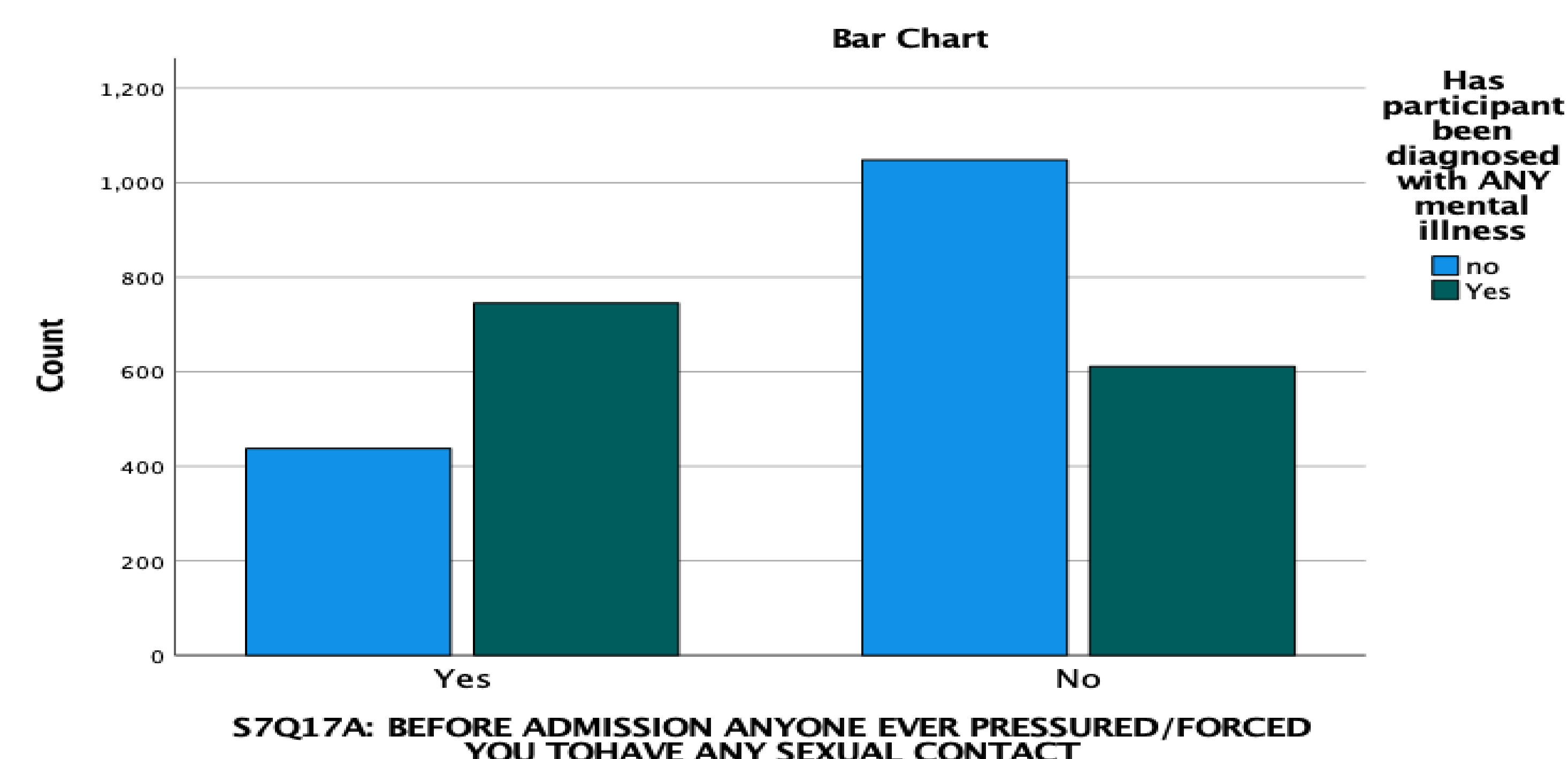
- Independent Variable:** Sexual Assault. The current study, sexual abuse was assessed with the question: "Before admission anyone ever pressured/forced you to have any sexual contact". Participants responded with either "yes," "no," "don't know" or "refused."
- Dependent Variables:** Mental Health. Mental health was categorized in three different variables such as Mental illness, Mood Disorders, and Anxiety Disorders. The participants were asked "yes" or "no" questions to determine if the participant was diagnosed with any of these disorders,

## RESULTS

- A chi-square inferential test was used to compare the frequency of mental illnesses amongst sexually assaulted female inmates compared to those who had not been sexually assaulted.
- Among sexually assaulted incarcerated females, 63.0% were diagnosed with some form of mental illness while 47.7% of the respondents who had not experienced sexual assault were diagnosed with some form of mental illness.

**Figure 1**

Count of the respondents who were diagnosed with any form of mental illness and experienced sexual assault versus those who have not experienced either variable.



## Mood Disorder & Sexual Assault

- A significant association was found for mood disorders ( $\chi^2(1) = 155.74, p < .001$ ) among sexually assaulted female inmates, however, Phi suggests a moderate relationship (.233).
- Female inmates who were diagnosed with any mood disorder and experienced sexual assault is (56.5%).

## Anxiety Disorder & Sexual Assault

- To compare the frequencies in anxiety disorder and sexual assaulted female inmates a chi-square was conducted as shown in figure 3.
- The chi-square demonstrated that (36.2%) of female inmates who had been sexually assaulted were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, while (15.9%) who had not been sexually assaulted were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

## DISCUSSION

- The first notable finding showed that female inmates are more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder if they have been sexually assaulted before arrest.
- Sexually assaulted female inmates diagnosed with a mental health disorder are likely to have a mood disorder.

## Implications for Social Work Practice

- This study provides the implications needed for future research to help provide programs in the criminal justice system.
- By addressing the mental health needs of the inmates, the criminal justice system will help prevent recidivism by helping inmates find positive coping mechanisms.
- By understanding the relationship between mental health and sexual assault, the prison systems can provide proper training in the facility to prevent or avoid any inmates being sexually assaulted during their sentence.
- This study highlights the significant rate of incarcerated women that are coping with their traumas and mental health disorders.

