

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Examining Disclosure of Physical and Sexual Victimization by Method in Samples of Women Involved in the Criminal Justice System

Kubiak, S., Nnawulezi, N., et al. (2012). "Examining Disclosure of Physical and Sexual Victimization by Method in Samples of Women Involved in the Criminal Justice System." *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 51: 161 - 175.

Key Words: specific responsibility, sexual victimization, physical victimization

Summary/Conclusions

A number of previous studies have examined disclosure of physical and sexual abuse in women. The previous studies were largely concentrated on college students. This study examined if anonymous paper surveys or face to face interviews elicited more reports of physical or sexual victimization in the previous 12 months by women involved in the criminal justice system. A total of 565 women from a Midwestern urban county jail participated in the study. Researchers discovered that anonymous surveys elicited more instances of disclosure to physical abuse (44%) and sexual abuse (18%) than face to face interviews (24% physical, 10% sexual abuse).

Limitations of Information

Researchers made attempts to minimize the perceived control interviewers had over female inmates; however, there was no way to eliminate all the potential perceived control. Another limitation was not being able to match the characteristics of the interviewer and interviewee. Lastly, the study contained a limited sample from one Midwestern United States jail. It is unclear if a study in Colorado would have similar results.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is *not* intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Disclosure of Traumatic Events

Traumatic events in a person's life can have an impact on virtually all aspects of her or his life. Two common traumatic events for women involved in the criminal justice are physical and sexual victimization. Prior research has sought to discover the best way to receive accurate reporting of victimization; however, there has not been any prior research on victimization reported by women involved in the criminal justice system.

The current study consisted of two groups of females from an urban Midwestern jail. One group, 515 females, was asked a number of questions through a paper and pencil survey. Another group of 50 females were asked the same questions in a face to face interview format. One of three female researchers administered the face to face interviews. Both groups consisted of roughly the same demographic populations and the survey was conducted within a year.

In the anonymous paper and pencil survey, 44% of females disclosed experiencing physical victimization in the previous 12 months. Eighteen percent (18%) of the participants in the anonymous group also reported sexual victimization in the previous 12 months. The face to face interviews resulted in lower disclosures of both physical and sexual victimization. Only 24% of the women that were interviewed disclosed physical victimization and 10% of the women interviewed disclosed sexual victimization in the previous 12 months. This finding supports some previous re-

search that highly stigmatized populations prefer disclosure of traumatic events in an anonymous setting. It is also important to note, researchers believed that higher rates of disclosure were achieved when characteristics of the interviewer closely matched those of the interviewee.

Practical Applications

- ✓ Be mindful that stigmatized populations may not want to disclose past traumatic events.
- ✓ While traumatic events may not be reported, consider giving probationers a choice between male and female therapists. This will help address specific responsivity factors.
- ✓ Collaborate with treatment and service providers to ensure that probationers are receiving proper treatment matching.
- ✓ Regularly check in with probationers about their feelings in social and treatment settings. This may hint at previous traumatic events.
- ✓ Try using Motivational Interviewing and other rapport building techniques before attempting to discuss or ask about traumatic events.
- ✓ Emphasize personal choice in the disclosure of traumatic events.
- ✓ Attempt to minimize perceptions of power before asking about victimization especially in traumatic events that relate to power and control.
- ✓ Consider asking questions about victimization at reassessments, as disclosure may happen later when a probationer feels comfortable.