

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

The Impact of Violence and Abuse on Women's Physical Health: Can Trauma-Informed Treatment Make a Difference?

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Key Words: Trauma, Gender, Responsivity, Treatment, Substance Abuse

Summary/Conclusions

Recently, there has been an increased focus on trauma-informed care. Trauma is a specific responsivity factor that can affect treatment. Researchers were interested if trauma had any effect on women's health and health related behaviors (e.g. smoking, drug and alcohol use). The study discovered that trauma is related to poorer subjective health and drug use. Post-traumatic symptoms had the strongest relationship with poorer subjective health and drug and alcohol use. There was no significant difference between the control and intervention group, but the study did uncover that decreased drug use and post-traumatic symptom severity each predicted improved subjective physical health.

Limitations of Information

The study only examined the effects of trauma on women, it is unclear if the results would be similar to men. All participants received treatment. There may be a larger effects for women who were not in any treatment. While the study did attempt to control trauma-informed care, it is unclear if the control group received some similar care as all of the study participants were currently receiving services.

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.

Benefits to Trauma Triage

Prior research has identified that past trauma is linked to poor physical health, a lack of nutrition, increased smoking, and substance abuse. In the current study, researchers were interested: if the level of trauma experienced determined a woman's level of current physical health, if trauma-informed care improved physical health, and lastly if changes in post-traumatic symptoms, health behaviors, alcohol and drug use, access to medical care, and interpersonal abuse predict changes in physical health.

A total of 2,729 women were recruited for the study from various service providers (e.g. mental health treatment, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence programs). Participants were assigned to either a "usual care" group or a trauma-informed intervention group. Researchers collected information through a series of interviews for one year. Participants answered questions about a series of measures on trauma and health at various periods throughout the duration of the study.

At the end of one year, researchers compared the compiled information. The first result, the researchers noted was a small but significant correlation between abuse, life events, and physical health problems. Women who were exposed to lifetime interpersonal violence and were currently experiencing abuse were more likely to engage in drug and alcohol abuse. Post-traumatic symptoms were related to poor health measures as well as drug and alcohol

use. There were no significant results between the intervention group or usual treatment group. Predictors for improved physical health included reduced exposure to interpersonal abuse, reduced severity of post-traumatic symptom severity, and reduced drug use.

Practical Applications

- ✓ During the assessment period ask probationers about current and past stressors and/or trauma. This may inform treatment matching efforts and service referrals.
- ✓ Refer probationers and victims to treatment and/or services that may help impact unhealthy or abusive environments.
- ✓ For ambivalent probationers, try weighing the pros and the cons of leaving an abusive situation. This will honor their autonomy yet uncover discrepancy about their current situation.
- ✓ Consider asking probationers about stress and trauma throughout probation. Reducing trauma and stress may help in reducing substance abuse.
- ✓ Help probationers develop establish case plans and safety plans that reduce risky situations that are connected to stressful and traumatic events.
- ✓ Engage in skill practice and problem solving with clients that are having difficulty resolving stressful situations.
- ✓ Work with treatment providers to help address and reduce stress and trauma in client's lives.

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