



Original communication

Exposure to physical and sexual violence prior to imprisonment predicts mental health and substance use treatments in prison populations

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to establish rates of exposure to physical or sexual violence (PSV) prior to imprisonment for prisoners in Spain and to explore whether people exposed to PSV access mental health treatment during imprisonment. In a sample of 2484 male and 225 female prisoners, socio-demographic variables, exposure to PSV prior to imprisonment and mental health treatments during imprisonment were assessed. Frequencies were calculated as per cent values with 95% confidence intervals (CI). The Risk Ratio (RR) of PSV and other socio-demographic variables to associate with mental health treatment during imprisonment was established. History of PSV was present in 35.2% (95% CI: 33.3–37.0) of the male and 40.0% (95% CI: 33.9–46.8) of the female prisoners. 70.7% (95% CI: 67.8–73.9) of the male and 76.9% (95% CI: 67.7–86.0) of the female prisoners with prior exposure to PSV were in mental health treatment during imprisonment. PSV was a significant predictor of mental health treatment during imprisonment in male (RR: 2.79; 95% CI 2.44–2.92) and female (RR: 1.94; 95% CI 1.76–2.23) prisoners. Most people with exposure to PSV prior to imprisonment access mental health treatment during imprisonment. Treatments may have to focus more on traumatic experiences.

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1. Introduction

Exposure to physical and sexual violence (PSV) in childhood is a diagnostic criterion for post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and borderline personality disorders, it also relates to anxiety and depression disorders in the general population.^{1–4} Exposure to PSV in childhood can contribute to criminal behaviour,⁵ substance abuse⁶ and suicide attempts.⁷ Two meta-analyses found that people exposed to PSV or neglect during childhood show higher prevalence rates of mental disorders in adulthood.^{8,9}

Exposure to PSV prior to imprisonment is common in prison populations.^{10–15} Rates of exposure to PSV in prisoners are higher than in the general population.¹⁶ Nearly 60% of the women in US state prisons had been exposed to PSV prior to imprisonment, of

which 70% indicated that exposure took place prior to age of 18 years.¹⁷ Nearly 17% of the male prisoners reported exposure to PSV during childhood.¹⁸ Childhood exposure to PSV in prisoners is associated with violent behaviour in adulthood prior to imprisonment.^{19–22} A study conducted in Germany reported estimates that half of the male and more than half of the female prisoners were exposed to physical violence in childhood; 16% of the male and 22% of the female prisoners were exposed to sexual violence in childhood.²³ Previous studies indicate an association between exposure to PSV in childhood and a wide range of psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety and substance use disorders in prisoners.^{22,24}

This present study aimed to establish rates of childhood and adulthood PSV for prison populations in Spain. Furthermore, the study aimed to explore whether PSV relates to mental health treatments during imprisonment.

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2. Methods

2.1. Setting

This was a descriptive study with a cross-sectional design. A random sample of inmates aged 18–74 was drawn from eight adult prisons for men and women operated under the Spanish Prison System located in the southeast of Spain ($N = 5545$), in the provinces of Murcia, Andalucía, Valencia and Castilla la Mancha. There are 68 adult prisons in Spain, including 65 minimum, 2 medium, and 1 maximum security level. The Spanish prison system is public. Male and female inmates are co-located in the same prison facilities but housed in segregated units. Inclusion criteria were: 1) having been imprisoned in one of the 8 prison facilities for at least six months in January 2014. Exclusion criteria were: 1) language barrier and 2) being classified as high-risk or special needs (approximately 2.5% of the total prison population).

2.2. Procedures

Questionnaires were self-administered (paper and pencil administration) and were available in Spanish and French, which accommodated the language needs of the inmate population (15 inmates completed the French version of the survey). The questionnaire was administered in a private room by research staff and without the presence of prison staff. The survey was administered to groups of approximately 20 people in a classroom setting. On average, subjects completed the survey in approximately 45 minutes. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 58 inmates (2.1%). When special assistance was requested, there was the possibility to conduct the interview face-to-face.

Four research assistants (Bachelor's level) were trained in the data collection protocol and administered the questionnaire. Interviewers assisted reading or discerning the meaning of any question if requested. They followed a protocol in terms of explaining the questionnaire and the study. The four trained fieldworkers conducted the interviews between January and August 2014.

2.3. Sample and recruitment procedure

Equivalent numbers of inmates were selected from each province. However, the targeted samples varied in size across prisons due to differences in population size (e.g., the largest housed approximately 1800 inmates and the smallest, approximately 100). To enrol a 50% random sample from each facility, with an expected refusal rate of 40%, we randomly selected 92% of residents from each facility. Participation rates across facilities ranged from 41% to 65%, with a mean participation rate of 57%. $N = 105$ inmates refused to participate in the study for the following reasons: “there was nothing to be gained from the survey” and “I am leaving prison soon”.

Approximately 2 weeks prior to the fieldwork at each prison, the vice-director of the prison sent census information to the principal investigator, which included legal status, location, and time incarcerated for current incarceration (in days). Each resident was assigned a random number and was selected for inclusion in the study by a random number generator. A list of the inmate numbers selected for inclusion in the study were sent to the vice-director at each facility. Social Workers at the prisons delivered recruitment letters to people selected to participate, and explained details of the study (purpose, date of the interview, and the ability of the prisoner not to participate without any adverse consequences).

2.4. Participants

On August 31, 2015, there were 64,496 adult inmates: 59,543 (92.3%) males and 4953 (7.7%) females' inmates.²⁵ We compared sociodemographic characteristics of our sample (only participants) with the total prison populations separately for each gender regarding data provided by the Spanish Prison System and Ministry of Justice.

The male subsample did not differ with regard to age from the total male prison population (with a mean age of 36.8 years) but it did show a lower proportion of foreigners among study participants (21.3 vs. 27.4%). Women comprised 8.3% of the sample, which was equivalent to the 7.7% of women in the total prison population. As for the male prisoners, the proportion of foreigners was significantly lower than in the total female prison population (19.1% vs. 30.1%). In terms of offense characteristic, the proportion of the enrolled sample serving a sentence for theft was not significantly different from the prison population as a whole (males: 43.3% vs. 39.4%; females: 30.7% vs. 33.8%) as well as drug-related offenses (males: 24.7% vs. 22.5%; females: 38.7% vs. 35.3%) and violent offenses (males: 20.0% vs. 17.6%; females: 17.8% vs. 15.9%), and the mean age of first offense in the sample was also equivalent to the total prison population (males: 21.6 vs. 20.3 years; females: 23.4 vs. 22.5 years).

2.5. Variables

2.5.1. Independent variables

2.5.1.1. Demographic characteristics. Participants provided information on gender (measured as 0 = male and 1 = female), age (continuous variables starting at age 18), nationality (coded categorically as 0 = Spanish, 1 = European countries excluding Spain, and 2 = non-European countries) marital status (coded categorically as 0 = never married, 1 = married, 2 = divorced, and 3 = widowed), and highest level of education completed (coded categorically from 0 to 3, with higher level representing higher educational level).

2.5.1.2. Criminal variables. Adapted from a previous study,²⁶ three variables were constructed for the offense leading to the current incarceration. Including: violent offense (1 = yes) (defined as battery, assault, or murder), property offense (1 = yes) (defined as burglary, grand larceny, and armed, strong-arm, or common-law robbery), drug trafficking offense (1 = yes) (defined as substance use manufacture, distribution, or trafficking) and other offense (1 = yes). Finally, questions regarding duration of the current prison sentence (continuous variables starting at 6 months), age at first offense (continuous variables in years), and number of previous convictions (whether or not offense led to legal proceedings) were included.

2.5.1.3. Exposure to violence. Exposure to PSV was assessed using protocols from previous studies.^{22,27} Items were dichotomized (0 = no, 1 = yes) depending on whether the respondent had been exposed to PSV during childhood (prior to age 18) and during adulthood (18 and older and prior to imprisonment). Exposure to physical violence was assessed using the following question: “Have you been physically assaulted or threatened with a knife or gun?”. Respondents who responded ‘yes’ were considered to have been exposed to physical violence. Exposure to sexual violence was indicated if the following specific questions were answered with ‘yes’: 1) Had anyone touched you in a way that you felt was sexually? and 2) Had anyone made you have oral or anal sex (or vaginal sex for women) by using force or threat of force?”. Exposure to sexual violence was coded ‘yes’ if ‘yes’ was responded to one of the two questions. Participants exposed to physical and/or sexual

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