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Mental disorder and victimisation in prison: Examining the role of mental health treatment

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ABSTRACT

Background There is evidence that people with mental disorders are at increased risk of victimisation in prison. It is unclear whether this risk of victimisation varies across types of disorders or symptoms and what role mental health treatment has on victimisation risk in this context.

Aims To examine the relationship between specific mental disorders, psychiatric symptoms, and victimisation in prison and the effect of treatment for the disorders on victimisation risk.

Methods Using a nationally-representative sample of prisoners, path analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between mental disorder and victimisation. The analyses also examined whether receiving mental health treatment in prison affected any such relationship.

Results Victimisation risk varied with the type of mental disorder or symptoms. Depression, personality disorder, hopelessness, paranoia, and hallucinations were associated with increased victimisation risk. Psychotic illnesses were otherwise negatively associated with victimisation. Receiving mental health treatment in prison was associated with greater risk of victimisation there. Receiving treatment appeared to mediate the relationship between mental disorders, symptoms, and victimisation.

Conclusions The findings suggest that not all inmates with mental disorders are at an increased risk of victimisation. Further, mental health treatment in prison also appears to be a risk factor of victimisation. More research is needed to further elucidate the relationship between mental disorders, treatment, and victimisation. Copyright © 2017 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Substantial numbers of prisoners have a mental disorder (Fazel & Seewald, 2012; James & Glaze, 2006) with the prevalence of mental disorder being much higher among prisoners than in the general population (Diamond et al., 2001; Prins, 2014). Among the many concerns this may raise is the safety of these individuals within prisons, particularly since research has shown that having a mental illness significantly increases the risk of victimisation (Blitz et al., 2008; Caravaca-Sanchez & Wolff, 2016; Teasdale et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2007).

When researchers have investigated becoming a victim in this context, they have simply identified having a mental disorder, typically, a serious disorder such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, as a risk factor for victimisation or compared the prevalence of victimisation among disordered prisoners and non-disordered prisoners (Blitz et al., 2008; Caravaca-Sanchez & Wolff, 2016; Wolff et al., 2007). As such, the role that specific mental disorders or psychiatric symptoms may play in such risk has been relatively unexplored (Pare & Logan, 2011). These omissions are surprising as research in the community indicates that the risk of victimisation is not consistent across disorder, psychiatric symptoms affect actions, and those exhibiting particular symptoms may be more likely than others to become targets (Silver et al., 2005). Further, psychiatric symptoms which are related to violence perpetration may, in turn, increase the risk of victimisation (Swanson et al., 2006). It is not known if receipt of treatment is related to victimisation risk among prisoners.

There are several challenges to providing care and treatment to mentally ill prisoners. First, despite the constitutional right to receive mental health care and treatment in prisons in the USA, research shows that, in practice, access to such care is irregular (Gonzalez & Connell, 2014), with many prisoners not receiving mental health care after admission (James & Glaze, 2006; Wilper et al., 2009). Secondly, the method of mental health care delivery varies by state. In some states, administration of care is provided directly by the Department of Correction, whereas other states employ the services of private vendors, and the cost and challenges associated with outsourcing treatment may act as a barrier to quality treatment (Daniel, 2007). It is possible that those receiving treatment experience a reduction in the negative outcomes typically associated with having a mental disorder in prison, including victimisation (Hiday et al., 2002), so a better understanding of the role of treatment in victimisation risk is essential.

Method

The study utilised secondary data, which was acquired following approval by the Institutional Review Board. The original data collection was conducted by a

governmental agency. Confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout both studies.

Data and Sampling

We used data from the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities (SISFCF; (U. S. Department of Justice, 2004)), which were collected between October 2003 and May 2004. The SISFCF consists of datasets that are nationally and geographically representative of prisoners in the USA. The sample is generated through a two-stage sampling procedure, with prisons being selected in the first stage and prisoners within them in the second. The sample included 14,499 prisoners from 287 state prisons and 3,686 prisoners from 39 federal prisons.

Measures

Dependent variable: victimisation. Prisoners were asked "Since your admission [most recent admission date], have you been injured in a fight, assault, or incident in which someone tried to harm you?" (coded 0 = no, 1 = yes).

Independent variables

Mental disorders. Respondents were asked "Have you ever been told by a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist or psychologist, that you had... a depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, psychotic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety disorder, or personality disorder?" (each coded as 0=no, 1=yes).

Psychiatric symptoms. The measure of *depressive cognition* was made up of three questions about feelings during the past year (e.g., have you ever felt numb or empty inside?) Each was coded 0 if the answer was 'no' to all three questions or 1 if 'yes' to one or more. *Paranoia* was rated according to the answer to a question 'do you feel like you are being plotted against or spied on?' (code 0/1); *delusions* 'do you think that others can read your thoughts? Or control your mind?' (code 0/1); *hallucinations* 'do you see or hear things that others around you cannot see or hear?' (code 0/1). For a description of all survey items used to create these measures see Appendix A in Online Supporting Information.

Mental health treatment. Two measures of mental health treatment were created. *Recent mental health treatment:* 'were you taking medication or receiving mental health care in the 12 months before arrest or being in prison?' (code 0/1) and *treatment in prison* – the same question but referring to the period in prison (code 0/1; see Appendix B for full details in Online Supporting Information).

Substance dependence. In the SISFCF 2004, drug and alcohol abuse and dependence are defined by the DSM-IV categories (see Appendix C in Online Supporting Information). Using the survey items, a dichotomous measure was created and coded 1 if inmates met the criteria for drug/alcohol abuse and dependence and 0 if they did not.

Control variables. In line with previous research, several variables that are potentially related to victimisation were also included. *Previous victimisation* measured physical and sexual victimisation experiences prior to admission to prison (0 = no, 1 = yes). Age was measured as a continuous variable, but all personal descriptors treated categorically (*sex* male= 0, female=1; *ethnicity* 0=Non-White (subgroups were too small for further division), White=1; *marital status* (married=0, single/divorced/in a relationship=1).

Time served was measured in years as a continuous variable. As a proxy for facility security level, available only for the federal data, hours spent in place where respondents slept was used as a measure of the amount of time inmates spend in their cells; higher security prisons require inmates to spend more time in their cells: 'In the last 24 hours, how much total time did you spend where you sleep?'. A single variable was created to measure participation in programmes (e.g., classes, religious groups; 0 = none, 1 = participation in any programme). Dummy variables were created for the conviction offence variable: violence, including sex offences (reference category), property, drug, and other. To measure any misconduct in prison, respondents were asked 'Since your admission [most recent admission date], have you been written up or found guilty of breaking any of the prison rules?' (0/1). Facility type measured whether or not respondents were housed in a state or federal facility (0 =state, 1 =federal). Distributions of age, time served and hours in cell were skewed so the natural log was taken for each measure.

Analytical Plan

Binary logistic regression with path analyses were conducted in Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1988-2015). First, direct effects of mental disorders, psychiatric symptoms, and substance dependence on prison victimisation were examined. In the second model, the direct and indirect effects of mental health treatment were examined. Because of the complex structure (sample weights and clustering) of the data, Mplus uses the weighted least squares estimation, and produces probit coefficients for binary outcomes. The final sample size was 15,629 after missing cases were deleted listwise; none of the measures had more than 10% of cases missing.

Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of the main variables. Of the sample, 13% (2,382) had experienced being a victim of some sort of physical assault during this period of imprisonment, and about one quarter have a history of victimisation before this imprisonment. Overall, between 1% (bipolar) and 20% (depression) of the prisoners reported being diagnosed with one of the mental disorders other than substance abuse (details are shown in Table 1), and two-thirds of them reported substance dependence. Only 14% reported having had any treatment in the community during the year prior to imprisonment and just one fifth during prison. Half were White, four-fifths men and most (81%) single. Mean age was nearly 36, but there was a wide range. The largest offence group was violent offences (41%).

Variables	N (%)	Mean (SD)	Range
Victimisation	2,382 (13%)		
Depression	3,651(20%)		
Bipolar	1,911 (1%)		
Psychotic	775 (4%)		
PTSD	1,153 (6%)		
Anxiety	1,449 (8%)		
Personality	1,078 (6%)		
Depressive cognition	7,607 (43%)		
Paranoia	1,291 (7%)		
Delusions	1,193 (7%)		
Hallucinations	5,739 (32%)		
Substance dependence	11,322 (67%)		
Recent treatment	2,448 (14%)		
Prison treatment	3,683 (20%)		
Time in prison (years)		3.87 (5.04)	
			0-43
Programme participation	12,373 (69%)		
Hours in cell		12.59 (5.68)	0-24
Rule violations	8,300 (47%)		
Previous victimisation	4,376 (24%)		
White	8,931 (50%)		
Female	3,888 (21%)		
Age (years)		35.83 (10.51)	16-84
Marital status	14,772 (81%)		
Violent offence	7,590 (41%)		
Property offence	4,106 (20%)		
Drug offence	4,271 (27%)		
Other offence	1,788 (11%)		
Federal institution	3,686 (20%)		

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (weighted, N=15,629)

Note. All variables in the models are binary except age, time in prison, and hours in cell.

Table 2 presents the findings for models examining the relationship between mental disorder and victimisation. In the direct effects model, depression and personality disorder were positively associated with victimisation. That is, inmates with depression or a personality disorder were more likely to have become a victim of violence in this episode of imprisonment than those without either disorder. Inmates who reported depressive cognition, paranoia, and/or

	Direct ef	fects	Direct & Indirect effects		
Variables	\boldsymbol{b}^1	SE^2	b^1	SE^2	
Depression	0.176***	0.046	0.076	0.055	
Bipolar	0.025	0.056	-0.014	0.057	
Psychotic	-0.170*	0.077	-0.220**	0.080	
PTSD	0.021	0.067	-0.006	0.068	
Anxiety	-0.017	0.066	-0.065	0.067	
Personality	0.128*	0.066	0.123	0.063	
Depressive cognition	0.178***	0.066	0.162***	0.035	
Paranoia	0.323***	0.052	0.303***	0.052	
Delusions	0.070	0.058	0.064	0.059	
Hallucinations	0.075*	0.035	0.064	0.035	
Substance dependence	0.056	0.036	0.055	0.037	
Recent treatment			0.025	0.051	
Prison treatment			0.076**	0.029	
Time in prison	0.433***	0.025	0.426***	0.025	
Hours in cell	0.135***	0.037	0.127***	0.038	
Programme participation	0.082*	0.036	0.065	0.035	
Rule violation	0.625***	0.037	0.613***	0.037	
Prior victimisation	0.176***	0.038	0.154***	0.040	
White	0.151***	0.033	0.135***	0.033	
Female	-0.402***	0.061	-0.428***	0.062	
Age	-0.636***	0.065	-0.663***	0.064	
Marital status	0.106*	0.045	0.094*	0.045	
Property offence ³	-0.025	0.044	-0.019	0.044	
Drug offence	-0.219***	0.044	-0.201***	0.045	
Other offence	-0.054	0.058	-0.044	0.059	
Federal institution	-0.071	0.066	-0.065	0.068	
Intercept	0.552*	0.254	0.534*	0.256	
Pseudo R ²	0.334	ł	0.340		

Table 2: Probit regression predicting prison victimisation

Note. N = 15,629. The final sample weight was employed for all analyses. *p < .05, **p < .01, **p < .001¹Probit coefficients ²Standard errors ³The reference category for the offences is violent offence hallucinations were also more likely to report experiencing such victimisation. Neither substance abuse nor dependence, by contrast, was significantly associated with the likelihood of victimisation. Interaction terms between each mental disorder and substance dependence were created and run to examine the effects of co-occurring disorders on victimisation; none of the interaction terms was significant. Several of the control variables were also associated with victim experiences: time served, hours in cell, participation in programmes, having a rule violation, previous victimisation and ethnic group. Conversely, sex, age, and having an index drug offence were inversely associated with victimisation.

The second column in Table 2, and Figure 1, shows the relationship between mental disorder and in-prison victimisation experiences after accounting for mental health treatment. Prisoners who received mental health treatment while incarcerated were more likely to experience such victimisation. The figure shows evidence of mediation. Specifically, the coefficient for depression is no longer significant, reduced from 0.176 to 0.076, although depressive cognition and paranoia remained positively and significantly associated with victimisation, regardless of treatment. The effect of psychotic disorder remained significant, with the coefficient changing only from -0.170 to -0.220, indicating that prisoners with a psychotic disorder are less likely to be victimised, regardless of treatment in prison. The relationship between hallucination and victimisation was no longer significant after allowing for treatment (coefficient reduction: 0.075 to 0.064).

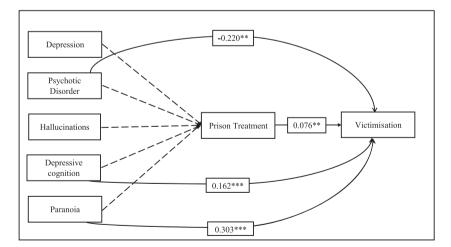


Figure 1: Graphical depiction of the full model with direct and indirect effects. Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. All significant indirect effects at p<.05 are denoted by dashed lines. Direct effects are denoted by solid lines. Control variables and independent variables that were not significant were omitted from the figure for clarity.

Discussion

Our study provides several key findings. First, not all mental disorders or symptoms of mental disorder are significantly related to risk of becoming a victim of violence in prison. Prisoners with depression and/or personality disorder were more vulnerable than prisoners without disorder, but those with psychotic disorders less so; those who reported depressive cognitions, paranoia, and/or hallucinations were more vulnerable. The finding that symptoms are relevant for becoming a victim, even after allowing for mental disorder, are consistent with the findings of Teasdale et al. (2014) and Swanson et al. (2006).

Our findings suggest support for the previous research, in that inmates with mental disorders are acutely vulnerable. Specifically, it is possible that inmates with the types of disorders and symptoms we found to be positively related with victimisation may be targeted because they deviate from prison norms and are viewed as easy to manipulate (Pare & Logan, 2011; Schnittker & Bacak, 2015). Additionally, inmates with depression may suffer from functional deficiencies such as loss of interest, difficulty sleeping, and diminished movement that increases target attractiveness and suggests to others vulnerability. Further, these inmates may be physically or cognitively unable to engage in self-protective action.

Second, the findings suggest support for the social interactionist theory of violence (Felson, 1992), in that aggression and violence are a result of negative social interactions with others. It is possible that bizarre behaviour and symptoms that manifest from mental disorders are perceived by others as disrespectful or provoke others into fights (Pare & Logan, 2011). For example, persons with borderline personality disorder experience unstable emotions, thoughts, and relationships as well as impulsive and reckless behaviour (National Institute of Mental Health, 2016). Inmates experiencing paranoja and/or hallucinations—symptoms positively related to victimisation in our study—may respond to perceived threats with aggressive behaviours towards others. Pare and Logan (2011) previously found that prisoners with paranoia were more likely to experience victimisation and that the relationship is mediated by provocation on the part of inmates with a mental disorder. These authors suggest that paranoid prisoners are also more likely to perpetrate physical and verbal assaults. A finding that certain symptoms increase vulnerability to victimisation has important implications for correctional officers who are in a position to observe inmates' behaviours on a daily basis. It is important that correctional officers identify the inmates experiencing severe symptoms as they may be able to identify those who are particularly vulnerable to victimisation and provide them with extra surveillance and support.

Contrary to previous research (Blitz et al., 2008), we found that prisoners with psychotic disorders are less likely to experience victimisation. Although this finding is at first counterintuitive, particularly as some of the symptoms of these disorders in themselves were associated with vulnerability, it is possible that, once diagnosed, these prisoners may be placed in restricted housing, thus reducing their exposure to risk of victimisation (Reiter & Blair, 2015). Alternatively – and these explanations are not mutually exclusive, psychotic prisoners may be perceived as more dangerous and at greater risk of engaging in violence towards others than prisoners with internalising disorders such as anxiety disorder, and so have restrictions placed on their interactions with others. The difference in relationship between a diagnosis of psychotic illness on the one hand and symptoms on the other and victimisation could be further explained by the fact that the symptoms may indicate acute disturbance but the diagnosis something treated and more settled. In support of this possibility, in our data, 67% of those with a psychotic disorder reported hallucinations and 32% reported paranoia, but 29% did not report any symptoms during the previous 12 months. Of those who reported experiencing psychiatric symptoms, 31% reported receiving treatment in prison. It may be that those who have been labelled with a psychiatric disorder are treated differently by staff and other prisoners than those who exhibit symptoms, but without the sanction of diagnosis.

A third important finding is that, contrary to expectations and inconsistent with the findings of Hiday et al. (2002), mental health treatment in prison was associated with an increased likelihood of becoming a victim of assault. The magnitude of the relationship between the disorders/symptoms and victimisation is reduced for those who received treatment during incarceration. Specifically, treatment fully mediates the relationship between depression, personality disorder, hallucinations, and victimisation. For inmates with these disorders, then, when accounting for treatment, the disorder is no longer directly related to victimisation. The relationship between psychotic disorders, depressive cognition, paranoia, and victimisation are partially mediated, indicating that there is some other factor in addition to treatment that can explain the relationship between mental illness and victimisation. Thus, these findings suggest that to some extent, having had treatment during incarceration accounts for the relationship between mental disorder, symptoms, and victimisation. It should be noted, however, that inmates could select into treatment; thus, unless selection effects are accounted for, it is not possible to know that treatment is predictive of victimisation.

Despite the prevalence of mental disorder and symptoms among these prisoners, only 20% reported receiving any mental health treatment in prison. Although both disorders and symptoms were included in the analyses, the treatment measure may also capture the severity of symptoms. Thus, it may be that treatment itself is not a risk factor, but rather those most likely to receive treatment are also at an increased risk of victimisation as a result of the severity of their mental disorder. Future research should try to unpack such relationships further.

Limitations

The measures of mental health diagnoses are self-reported measures and, given the source of the data, no independent diagnostic tool was used. There is evidence, however, that suggests concordance between self-reported health and official records (Jackson et al., 2005; Wolff et al., 2004). Thus, while the measures of diagnosis are not necessarily as strong as if a diagnostic tool had been used. self-reports of disorder are likely to have reasonable validity among prisoners. As an additional measure of mental health, psychiatric symptoms were included as inmates could be symptomatic without a diagnosis. Another problem is that the treatment measure used here only accounts for the types of treatment inmates received since being admitted to prison and precluded examination of the quality, dosage, or duration of treatment. A third limitation is that the dependent variable, victimisation, encompasses all types of physical harm. As so few inmates report experiencing sexual victimisation, we were unable to examine any possible relationship between mental disorders and types of victimisation. Future research should evaluate these relationships, which might mean cooperation between researchers to generate samples of sufficient size. Fourthly, because disorders, victimisation and treatment are capturing experiences since admission to prison while symptoms were measured within the last 12 months, time ordering cannot be established. As such, disorders or symptoms may be the result of victimisation rather than creating vulnerability to it.

Generally, prisoners have little access to medical and mental health care while in the community (Petersilia, 2003). Although access to such care in prison is mandated, the extent to which treatment is effective is unclear. These findings suggest that inmates vulnerable to victimisation may be those with the greatest need for mental health care; however, it remains unclear how treatment can affect risk of becoming a victim. Treatment must be part of an holistic approach for managing prisoners with mental disorder.

Supporting information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the supporting information tab for this article.

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