

Sexual Assault and Criminalization of Black Women: Trauma Informed Responses

There are challenges to incorporating a contextualized understanding of sexual assault into everyday practice for practitioners; however, attention to the context of the human experience, particularly when serving criminalized Black women, is essential to enhancing service response and provision. Indeed, it is important for system players to acknowledge that Black women are disproportionately represented within the criminal legal system and that many of them have endured histories of trauma and oppression. System actors must also be sensitive to the specific cultural needs of this population. This fact sheet provides specific trauma-informed and culturally-responsive strategies for system actors to improve their current practices to meet the needs of criminalized Black women.

Sexual Assault, Criminalization, and Black Women

For every 15 Black women who are sexually assaulted, only one reports her rape to law enforcement. Rooted in a culture of silence, shame, and secrecy within their own communities compounded by complex histories with law enforcement and the legal system, studies show that Black women who do report crimes of sexual assault or violence are less likely to be believed than their White counterparts.¹

The 2012 release of the *Sex Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girl's Story* highlighted the prevalence and frequency of sexual violence and its dynamic link to confinement and incarceration. In one study of incarcerated Black girls in Oregon, 76% had experienced sexual abuse by the age of 13. The study further confirmed that interaction with law enforcement and the legal system is the result of punitive responses to behaviors or actions from years of untreated emotional and psychological trauma from previous abuse.² Unaddressed trauma becomes uninterrupted,

misdiagnosed—and worse—criminalized, resulting in a population vulnerable to further abuse.³

Depending on the study, more than half of incarcerated women were raped or experienced child sexual abuse before coming to prison. While in custody, women may be strip searched, subjected to sexualized surveillance (e.g., being watched in the shower), or pressured to provide sexual favors in exchange for privileges or access to resources, such as food or telephone calls.⁴

In a sample of Black women with documented histories of child sexual abuse, 27% were later sexually assaulted during adolescence and 42% were sexually assaulted in adulthood. A variety of intervening experiences and risk factors may converge to make juvenile sexual assault survivors more vulnerable to adult sexual revictimization. For example, victims of child sexual assault reported more adolescent risk-taking behaviors, such as substance use and running away from home. In addition, they were more likely to participate in risky sexual behaviors, including consensual sexual

behavior with multiple partners, to be sexually exploited or trafficked. As a result, child sexual assault victims were at an increased risk of being sexually victimized as adolescents and adults.⁵

Why it matters!

Formerly-incarcerated Black women experience long-term economic, political, occupational, educational, emotional, and physical consequences. There is an urgent need to prevent sexual violence against Black women.

Trauma-Informed Framework

Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual and/or community as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's and/or community's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

Upholding a trauma-informed framework helps practitioners empathize with how individuals feel and provides context for the behavior and treatment of individuals and their communities. It requires re-envisioning service engagement as human-informed care and employing a comprehensive approach that considers much of an individual's lived experiences. While a trauma-informed response seeks to repair harm and strengthen the well-being of individuals and communities, it also recognizes the many ways in which histories of systemic and structural oppression impact trauma.

Survivors of sexual assault receive varied levels of support and engagement from community and legal system practitioners. The following guiding principles highlight programmatic enhancements that can improve trauma-informed service provision:

- **Understand the prevalence of sexual assault and impact of trauma:** Acknowledge the complexities surrounding victim-defendants, such as the criminalization of trauma responses, and the challenges of intersectional identities that include race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, mental health, and spirituality.
- **Promote safety:** Improve direct services through staff training that enlists staff as agents of prevention, intervention, and support. Meet clients where they are and promote safety as they define it.
- **Earn trust:** Encourage hope at all entry and access points to systems.
- **Provide holistic care:** Improve access to services by ensuring that services and agency partners are culturally relevant, language accessible, and trauma informed. Services should include, among other things, programming that supports healthy relationships with children and increases opportunities for economic empowerment through education and employment training. Additionally, collaborate with faith-based organizations to better meet the spiritual needs of clients, as well as organizations based in the communities in which clients live.
- **Respect human rights:** Treat clients with dignity and respect and learn about the specific needs of the target population to inform programmatic strategies.
- **Believe the narrative:** Centering the experiences of women, particularly women of color, helps reestablish healthy relationship dynamics.
- **Share power:** Recognize that clients are the experts in their own lives. Afford them the opportunity to make decisions, where possible, and acknowledge the complexities and challenges they face while avoiding judgment and pathology.
- **Communicate with compassion:** Understand that individual's feelings and behaviors are adaptations to survive and are normal reactions to abnormal experiences, such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.

1. National Organization for Women. "Black Women and Sexual Violence." NOW.org. <https://now.org/resource/learn-more-black-women-and-sexual-violence/> (accessed September 30, 2019).
2. Rosenthal, Lindsay et al. *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls' Story*. Washington, DC: Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality Human Rights Project, 2015. Accessed September 30, 2019. <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/poverty-inequality-center/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2019/02/The-Sexual-Abuse-To-Prison-Pipeline-The-Girls%E2%80%99-Story.pdf>
3. National Organization for Women. "Black Women and Sexual Violence." NOW.org. <https://now.org/resource/learn-more-black-women-and-sexual-violence/> (accessed September 30, 2019).
4. West, Carolyn and Kalimah Johnson. "Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women." *National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women* (2013): 1-14.
5. Fargo, Jamison D. "Pathways to Adult Sexual Revictimization: Direct and Indirect Behavioral Risk Factors Across the Lifespan." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 24, no. 11 (2009): 1771-1791.

For More Information

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