

Violence in jails and prisons can inflict lasting trauma on victims

November 7 2013, by Carrie Stetler

Ashley Schappell remembers hearing about the prisoner who was beaten and stomped by a fellow inmate in the cafeteria before his attacker poured a scalding pot of coffee on his head. Other inmates described random fights that culminated in stabbings.

Schappell, a Rutgers-Newark graduate student in the Department of Psychology, recently received a \$25,000 National Science Foundation grant to research how [violence](#) during incarceration affects [inmates](#). One question she seeks to answer is whether it makes their re-entry into society more difficult.

"We know that being exposed to violence and being victimized increases depression, anxiety and incidents of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#)," said Schappell, who once taught a psychology course in San Quentin prison. "Prisoners who tend to be victimized are people that I see over and over again. They get released and they come back. Some have been there their whole lives. Even though it's scary, it's all they know and they feel more comfortable there."

There have been few, if any, federal grants to study how violence affects adult inmates, according to Paul Boxer, an assistant professor of psychology who is supervising Schappell's research. "This is a great success story," Boxer said.

Schappell is in the midst of collecting data from 400 New Jersey male and female inmates, who are surveyed monthly about their experiences

with violence in jail and their levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. She hopes to be finished gathering information in May.

Her goal is to help inmates get the support they need to successfully adjust to life after release. "I think what these people really need is treatment. They need to see a psychologist and a psychiatrist to work through these issues and feelings," said Schapell, who became interested in researching the mental health of prisoners after volunteering to teach at the notorious San Quentin prison in California.

"As I learned more about the prison system and the injustices, it struck me as something that needed to be addressed," she said. "Even though they're inmates, they're human, and this is a human rights issue."

At San Quentin, the students in her psychology course were inmates trying to earn an associate's degree, and many were dedicated to learning. "It was a life changing experience to see how much education is valued for people who want to change their lives," said Schapell, who grew up in Augusta, Georgia. "The recidivism rate is so much lower for inmates who have had some education than for those who don't have access to that."

According to Schapell, counseling and treatment for victims of prison violence should begin during incarceration and be integrated with community service programs when prisoners are released.

The cost of failing to treat them can be high, she contends.

"What you do to these people inside matters a lot to them when they're released," she said. "And if you don't think of their futures, we're all going to be paying for it."

Provided by Rutgers University

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