Maintaining Intimate Relationships while Incarcerated

Bonnie Theis and Kayla Thorson
Advised by: Susan M. Wolfgram, Ph.D.

University of Wisconsin-Stout

RESEARCH PROBLEM

- In this country, as of March 2015, the United States has a total of 208,555 incarcerated people according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons (2015).

- Many incarcerated people have not been able to maintain healthy relationships with their partners and families, often a matter of limited access both within the facility and geographically.

- There is a need to find the most effective strategies for maintaining relationships within an incarceration setting.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What impact does being incarcerated have on intimate relationships and subsequently, the well-being of the incarcerated person?

PURPOSE

- To identify problems that incarcerated males and females were having in maintaining relationships while incarcerated.

- To have developed an email qualitative interview protocol that investigated the perspective of a jail program director and her perspective on how to improve visitation times in prison and jails.

- To have contributed to the limited amount of literature that concerned the well-being of incarcerated males and females regarding their intimate relationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Exchange Theory assumes that there are rewards and costs in every relationship (Strong et al., 2005). Within this theory people strive to achieve more benefits and decrease costs in their relationships which results in the best possible outcome. Within relationships the rewards and costs were often intangible, such as love, fear and loneliness. This balance of costs and benefits was what made an intimate relationship worth pursuing. An important part of any relationship was reciprocity; if one partner was giving more of their resources, such as time or money, than the other, their relationship was unbalanced which caused conflict (Malinowski, 1932; Mauz, 1967 as cited in Coppanzano & Michell, 2005).

As Applied to this study, this theory would predict that incarcerated men and women would have trouble sustaining a relationship with their significant others because the costs of the relationship as a result of the incarceration may outweigh the benefits (Strong et al., 2005).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Carceno, R., Perlman, D., López, F., Orgaz, M., and Fernández-Rouco, N. (2015) studied prison inmates’ sexual satisfaction in relation to their psychological health. The participants were asked to rate different key indicators of sexual satisfaction such as social loneliness, partner status, and total time in prison. They found that the more sexually satisfied the people in prison were the better their psychological health, which then lowered levels of misconduct in the prisons.

Khan, M., Behrend, L., Admora, A., Weir, S., White, B., and Wohl, D. (2011) examined how intimate relationships dissolving after incarceration. The researchers asked questions about primary relationships and characteristics of those relationships. They found that having romantic relationships protected against high-risk sexual activity and provided stability for these inmates but many of those relationships did not last because of the incarceration period.

Carceno, R., Perlman, D., Orgaz, M., López, F., Fernández-Rouco, N., and Faldowski, R. (2011) researched how partner status affected loneliness, sexual satisfaction, and quality of inside of prison. The findings for these inmates showed that those that were in a romantic relationship outside of prison had lower levels of romantic loneliness. Both incarcerated females and males showed that if their partner was outside of prison, they did not have much practical and emotional support from their partner.

Harman, J., Smith, V., and Egan, L. (2007) studied the impact of incarceration on intimate relationships with regards to separation from their partner for the amount of time they were in prison. They found that for healthy relationships, intimacy was considered crucial and that lack of intimacy causes relationship strain and that there was a sense of isolation and grief for incarcerated people because of the loss of contact with their partners.

Beer, J., Morgan, R., Garland, J., and Spanierman, B. (2007) examined the role of relationships while females were incarcerated. They found that females who were incarcerated were in high distress because they were separated and isolated from their significant others (Lindquist, 2000 as cited in Beer 2007).

SELECTED QUOTES AND FINDINGS

Can you tell us about your visitation policy between loved ones and the incarcerated person? Scheduled. Visitations hours have a set amount of time that incarcerated males and females have to see their partners. 20 minutes, 2 times per week. Through glass and telephone.

What are the biggest barriers that you see that inhibit the quality of visitation between partners? Limited privacy. In the prison system, partners are not allowed to speak to each other without others around.

What are the biggest barriers that you see that inhibit the quality of visitation with children? Confusion. Children do not understand the concept of incarceration and do not understand that they have limited access to their parent. “They have to have an adult with them and they don’t really understand and it has to be done over the phone.”

What improvements would you make to visitation hours to increase the wellbeing of incarcerated people and their significant others? Quality of time together.

Allowing incarcerated males and females more uninterrupted time spent with their families outside of visitation hours. “Gave them an extra visit and provided donated gifts to their children and they were able to spend time watching their children open their gift while talking on the phone.”

Please tell us anything else you would like us to know about the impact of not being in regular contact with loved ones while incarcerated? Open communication.

Phones are readily available for use to contact their families in this specific jail. “They are allowed to purchase phone cards to have regular time during the daytime to contact their families... This jail goes above and beyond with allowing access to our phones for inmates to make calls that are necessary for their wellbeing.”

QUOTES AND FINDINGS

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Practitioners
- In order to maintain healthy relationships, incarcerated males and females require more time with their families and intimate partners.
- Need for more privacy for incarcerated males and females from others
- Having a children’s education program that provides the children with more understanding on what is happening with their incarcerated parent as well as teaching effective coping strategies that will help them through this difficult time.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH
- The researchers only interviewed one participant, which limited the findings and took away the ability for more generalized research.
- Use a bigger sample size from different areas of the country. This would allow for more information about the entire United States, rather than just Wisconsin.
- Using mixed methods, both surveys and qualitative interviews, with incarcerated males and females and their families to gain insight on their point of view, not just professionals that work in a jail setting. This would allow for more diverse information about policy changes that would be beneficial for all involved.

CONCLUSION

To decrease the likelihood of offenders returning to jail or prison, it is important to support the maintenance of relationships that offenders depend on to transition back into their communities. It is in the best interest of all of us to make that happen since the vast majority of offenders leave jail and prison and move back into their communities.