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# The Domestic Violence Experiences of Women in Community Corrections

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# The Domestic Violence Experiences of Women in Community Corrections<sup>1</sup>

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*A variety of studies indicate high rates of domestic violence in the backgrounds of women offenders. We examine and extend this work through a qualitative study of women on probation or parole in a western U.S. county. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 women who participated in a larger study in which only questionnaire data were collected. Participants completed a brief telephone interview about prior experiences of partner violence and then a face-to-face extensive in-person interview. In the analyses, several notable themes emerged regarding the women's histories of child victimization, partner abuse, substance abuse, coercion into crime, and a lack of support services. Partner violence may play an important role in the genesis and maintenance of the criminality of a significant proportion of women, and should be acknowledged and addressed as part of programs intended to decrease recidivism.*

**Keywords:** Women, incarceration, domestic violence, battering, probation, parole, community corrections, substance abuse, child abuse, services, drugs, prevention

## INTRODUCTION

More than 20 years ago, Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez (1983) identified high rates of prior victimization among incarcerated women. Since then, concerted efforts to estimate the prevalence of abuse and violence in the histories of women offenders paint a picture of considerable victimization. National surveys of women in different correctional settings find that more than one-half of incarcerated women report childhood abuse or intimate partner physical abuse, and more than one-third report past sexual assault (American Correctional Association [ACA], 1990; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). More specifically, 57% of women in state prisons and 48% of women in local jails reported either physical or sexual abuse prior to incarceration (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). This compares to about 11% of women in a national survey of women in the general population who report intimate partner violence (Straus & Gelles, 1990).

While one might surmise from these findings that abuse is also prevalent in the histories of women in community corrections (probation and parole), few studies have examined this group of offenders in an in-depth manner. According to the first national survey of probationers, conducted in 1995, 41% of women on probation experienced either physical or sexual abuse, and almost 20% experienced both (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Lack of attention to women probationers and parolees is problematic for at least two reasons. First, women under community supervision represent a significant majority of women offenders as a whole; in 1998, 85% of women offenders in the correctional system were under community supervision (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Second, as Bloom and McDiarmid (2000) contend, the characteristics and needs of women offenders under community supervision need to be understood so

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that effective services can be developed that maximize the chances of successful outcomes (i.e., completion of community supervision, avoidance of recidivism, establishment of a prosocial lifestyle). In 2003, 23% of all probationers and 13% of all parolees were women (Glaze & Palla, 2004) and there is increasing agreement that services need to be gendered (Bloom & McDiarmid, 2000).

To this point, relatively little research or pragmatic attention has been paid to domestic violence and related issues for women in community corrections. While wider recognition has been given to the notion of “co-occurring disorders” (e.g., Drake, Mueser, & Clark, 1996; Stromwall & Larson, 2004), such as when substance abuse and mental illness coexist and exacerbate one another, recognition of the connectedness of these “disorders” to domestic violence experiences is just beginning within the correctional environment (Clark, 2002; Minkoff, 2001; Mullings, Pollock, & Crouch, 2002).

Our own clinical and scholarly experience suggests that the problem is much larger in scope and complexity than the simple additive effects of substance abuse, mental illness, and a history of abuse, each of which takes on varied forms and duration. These negative life experiences appear to interact, producing a complex context in which women must make decisions about legal and extralegal behavior. Further, the relationship between such experiences and other social structural factors, such as enduring poverty, poor educational alternatives, and general lack of community resources, must also be considered.

With these concerns in mind, this project was inspired by one of the authors who works directly with women on probation and parole in Lane County, Oregon. Because of her concern for the female population within community corrections, she and local researchers came together to examine the problem through a study aimed at having both practical and academic utility. This report, which utilizes data collected from qualitative interviews with a sample of women in community corrections, is designed to contribute to the understanding of the victimization-criminality link and the needs of women offenders at a potential turning point in their lives through an examination of the role that intimate partner violence plays in the lives (and crimes) of women. We focus on intimate partner violence per se because it is more proximate to adult offending than childhood experiences and it is more likely to be the form of victimization that women may be at risk during and after community supervision<sup>3</sup>.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the relationship between victimization and offending is often conducted through a conceptual framework known as “pathways to crime” (Arnold, 1990; Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983; Daly, 1992, 1994; Gilfus, 1992; Owen, 1998; Richie, 1996). This line of scholarship focuses on the ways in which the boundary between familial or intimate partner victimization and offending is often blurred for women and girls. Pathways research examines the circumstances throughout a person’s life course that place that individual at greater risk for violating the law (Belknap, 2001). Grounding this approach is an interest in understanding the causes of women’s offending in general and the causative role of victimization in particular.

Prospective studies that follow persons abused as children reveal that childhood abuse increases the risk of offending but the effect is small (e.g., Widom, 1989; Siegel & Williams, 2003); the majority of women

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<sup>3</sup> Women under community corrections may also be at risk for victimizations perpetrated by strangers and these stranger victimizations are also relevant to understanding the context of women’s lives (Lake, 1993). However, an examination of such experiences was beyond the scope of the current project.

(and men) who are abused as children do not become offenders. However, offending trajectories of abused and nonabused girls and women do differ. Siegel and Williams (2003) found that girls who were sexually abused were more likely to be arrested for violent offenses as juveniles and then to be arrested for any offense as adults than a matched comparison group of girls lacking a history of reported sexual abuse. Further, the majority of women offenders, as indicated by various national surveys (e.g., ACA, 1990; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999), have intimate partner abuse in their histories. The small but growing body of empirical research, aimed at understanding this pattern, supports the possible links between women's victimization and criminality in general, and between women's intimate partner victimization and offending in particular (e.g., Moe Wan, 2001; Owen, 1998; Richie, 1996). It is becoming increasingly clear that the vast majority of women with varying levels of involvement in the criminal justice system have a significant history of prior victimization in the form of intimate partner battering.

The initial research on this topic focused on the histories of abuse among women who kill (e.g., Browne, 1987; Brown & Williams, 1989; Jurik & Winn, 1990). More recently, researchers have focused on the relationship between prior victimization and women's non-lethal offending (Comack, 1996; Ferraro, 1997). While the nature of the relationship may vary according to specific situations, Moe (2004) identified some of the ways in which prior victimization may be linked to criminal offending. First, women may engage in certain forms of offending as a coping strategy for emotionally dealing with abuse in intimate relationships (e.g., illicit drug use to self-medicate). Second, women's offending may directly result from ongoing relationships with abusers (e.g., participating in a robbery due to an abusive partner's threats or coercion). Third, offending may be a survival mechanism subsequent to leaving an abusive situation (e.g., stealing to put food on the table). Along these lines, a key theme throughout research on women's criminality is the role of drug use and addiction as a way of coping with childhood maltreatment, adult victimization, and mental illness (Mullings et al., 2002).

Gilfus' (1992) analysis of life-history interviews with incarcerated women suggested a link between experiences of battering and criminality. Of the 20 women in the qualitative sample, 16 (80%) had been in abusive relationships. Some of the women reported being in as many as five battering relationships. All of them described relationships with their male abusers in which the women were expected to engage in behaviors such as prostitution or shoplifting to support the partner's or couples' addiction. According to the women, partners inflicted severe abuse when the women were perceived to be slacking in their efforts, stealing from their partners, or as punishment for prostituting.

Similarly, a connection between maltreatment and the delinquency offenses of adolescent girls has been identified through empirical research. The histories of the majority of girls in the juvenile justice system involve abuse and neglect. Adjudicated girls suggest incest, sexual molestation, and severe physical beatings precede their initial involvement in criminal activities (Arnold, 1990; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1998; Lake, 1993; Sargent, Marcus-Mendoza & Yu, 1993). Such research suggests that criminal involvement may result from attempts to survive their abusive histories (e.g., running away, prostitution).

In one of the few studies of women in community corrections, Klosak (1999) found that the most common pathway to crime began with negative or traumatic experiences during childhood. Through an analysis of case files of 161 women on probation and qualitative life-course interviews with 15 of them, Klosak (1999) found that instability in family structure and composition, exposure to violence, loss of family members to violent death, and/or child abuse and neglect during childhood resulted in and was aggravated further by myriad negative experiences throughout adolescence and adulthood. Such experiences included substance abuse and intimate partner abuse, which together created a context of risk for criminal involvement.

Certainly the situational context of women's criminality is not exclusive to heterosexual battery. Lesbian victims may also commit crimes within the context of battery (Moe Wan, 2001). In some cases, given the even greater lack of recognition and social response to same-sex battering (Allen & Leventhal, 1999; Renzetti, 1992), such victims may find themselves in even greater peril when dealing with an abusive partner in the face of breaking the law.

Taken together, these various research findings suggest that women throughout the criminal justice system are struggling with histories of victimization, and that this victimization, whether or not it is identified as a factor in criminal offending, is intricately tied to the resources women have available to them and the decisions they make on how to survive. It is not a far reach to hypothesize that intimate partner victimization may be linked to women's criminality in several ways. A better understanding of the ways that women probationers and parolees perceive these connections [and their needs] is critical to fostering successful completion of community supervision and to reducing the likelihood of a subsequent return to correctional supervision.

## METHODS

The data for this project were collected as part of a study on the prevalence of domestic violence among women on probation or parole in Lane County, Oregon (see Daugherty, Eddy, Bridges Whaley, & Paulic, 2005). Lane County is the size of Connecticut and has a total population of 300,000, which is centered in one moderately sized city. Approximately 390 of the 486 women on probation or parole were asked to complete a one-page, anonymous, self-administered questionnaire; 172 responded. The respondents tended to be similar to the parole and probation population at large: white, 34 years of age, with two children. Participants in the quantitative study subsequently were invited to participate in a qualitative study.

The cover letter to the larger quantitative study solicited women for an additional in-depth interview, the intent of which was to further investigate women's perceptions of the role of intimate partner violence in their criminality. Thirty-five interested women called and completed a screening interview, which included the original questionnaire and a few additional demographic and background questions. Women were selected for the qualitative portion of the project if they responded affirmatively to at least one question regarding an experience of domestic violence or one question regarding an admittance to committing a crime for or because of a partner. Twenty of the 35 women who expressed interest in the interview met one or both of these criteria. In-depth interviews were completed with 14 of the 20 eligible women (the remainder cancelled or missed appointments; see Klosak, 1999, for similar issues regarding response rate with this population).

A Licensed Clinical Social Worker and a Master of Social Work student intern conducted in-depth interviews, which lasted an average of two hours each. Respondents were paid \$10 for the telephone screening interview and \$25 for the in-depth interview. The audio taped sessions were transcribed and assigned code numbers and pseudonyms. Women in the in-depth interview sample were slightly older than the larger questionnaire sample (mean = 36,  $SD = 8$  vs. mean = 34,  $SD = 8$ ) and tended to be white (93%). None were currently married (compared to 13% in the questionnaire sample), and they were more likely to be never married (50% vs. 37%) or widowed (7% vs. 3%) and slightly less likely to be separated or divorced (43% vs. 46%). These women had an average of 2.2 children ( $SD = 1.7$ ) compared to 2.0 ( $SD = 1.6$ ) in the questionnaire sample.

Women were eligible for the interviews if they responded affirmatively to any of the six domestic violence questions on the screening instrument (e.g., "pushed, slapped, punched, kicked or hit you") or to any of the six questions that tapped their perception of a positive linkage between abusive partners and criminality. For the latter, women were asked whether they had ever "committed a crime because you

were threatened by a partner or spouse,” “committed a crime in an effort to please a partner or spouse,” “committed a crime to get drugs for a partner or spouse,” “admitted to a crime that was actually committed by a partner or spouse,” “lied to authorities to conceal a crime committed by a partner or spouse,” or “chosen to go to jail to avoid violence towards you by a partner or spouse.” While the screening process required the women to either report an experience of domestic violence or suggest that intimate abuse was connected to their offending, all the women responded affirmatively to an experience of domestic violence. Thus the sample is a group of women who have experienced intimate partner violence. This is a purposive sample; we wanted to learn from women with histories of domestic violence.

## INTERVIEW FINDINGS

### The Context of Criminality

All 14 women indicated that a current or past partner had shouted or yelled at them; called them names and/or insulted them; broken or destroyed items of theirs; and pushed, slapped, shoved or grabbed them. Ten out of 14 (71%) reported that a partner used force to make them have unwanted sex. All interviewees also reported being hurt badly enough that they still felt physical pain the day following at least one of these assaults. The following excerpts are telling:

The violence started when I was about two months pregnant. . . .He tried to run me over with the car. . . . He tried to run me in between the car and the house. I stepped up into the doorway. So I mean because he had been drinking and he went up and made the car go forward and got me in between the house and car. Hit my legs with it. But he backed off and I wasn't hurt but that's when it all started. . . . He used to put me in a chair, like in the middle of the living room or whatever, and yell at me and say, “This isn't how God would have you be a wife.” You know? . . . “Look what God is seeing you as right now. You're being a bitch and would God have you be like this?” I mean, just constant. . . . He was more mental than anything. He was, he would like, one time he pushed me into the corner of the bed and just yelled at me, it seemed like hours and hours, hours and hours. And then he would bring the kids in there and say “See, this is your mother. This is what she looks like.” . . . Um, one time he did get his gun and he did say he was going to kill himself and kill me and he loaded it and put it to my head in the hallway . . . kids' room was right here and their bunk beds was right there. And the kids both were looking at him holding this gun to my head. . . . (Eliza)

He started when my kids were little, to hit me, you know, then it just built up. He became possessive, controlling, I couldn't even look at a dog without him thinking it was, you know, I wasn't paying attention to him . . . giving too much attention to somebody else or you know if I smarted off or said anything that was, that he thought was out of line, he'd smack me. He's threatened to kill me several times, he's had a butcher knife at my throat, which I really thought he was going to go like this and take my life. (Cary)

[Q: How quickly did the violence start?] I want to say right away. We were both young and drinking and partying and such . . . a jealous, possessive person. I remember having to look at the ground when I was around people so that I didn't get accused of flirting with someone else. Even his own cousins. His own relatives he was jealous of. Um, I used to keep a diary, I remember writing in there some years past, that in the beginning like the first 5 years, it was daily and went from 5 to 10 [years] it was weekly and from 10 to 15 [years] it was monthly and our last 15 to 20 [years] was like yearly so it gradually got less. There was a lot of screaming and yelling and hair pulling and fighting and one time he stuck a gun under my chin [crying]. I told him to shoot me, I was tired of it. (Jodi)

Indeed, these women appeared to experience what Johnson (1995, 2000) has termed “intimate terrorism” (originally termed “patriarchal terrorism” but changed to account for same sex battering). That is, they experienced a pattern of tactics, including physical violence, sexual assault, emotional degradation, financial exploitation, and harassment, as a means of being controlled by their partners. In these situations, most of the abuse was described as one-sided, with their partners initiating the majority of assaults and causing the most injury.

Several other themes emerged in the interviews that provide a contextual foundation for their narratives of criminality. For half of the women (7/14), abusive intimate relationships were preceded by experiences of childhood physical abuse and/or sexual abuse. For Sheila, who ended up in a series of, at times mutually, abusive lesbian relationships, violence and abuse were all she knew.

Everything was just chaotic, it was like oh man, if my mom wasn't fighting with *brother 1*, *brother 2* was fighting with dad, *brother 3* was fighting with dad and one of the neighbors would always come and get me. [Q: So like physical fights?] Yeah, all the time. All the time, my brother (3) beat my dad so bad it put him in the hospital.

In addition to witnessing family violence, Sheila experienced abuse at the hands of a nonfamily member.

Our neighbor boy molested me a bunch of times when I was like five . . . four or five. I remember all that just about. You know . . . I remember it well, anyway, he was older, he was like in his teens, I was just a little kid.

Experiences of childhood abuse were often followed by abuse in adolescence and adulthood. A pattern of successive abusive relationships was reported by many interviewees, as was illustrated by Mary.

My mother had me raped when I was 10 and she had the neighbor man do it and so after that it didn't matter to me. So 11 [years old] was the first encounter that I had with, of my own, and that was a boy that was the same age by one day. But I don't remember that it was anything that I wanted, you know? And I remember having boyfriends, you know, but never anything that was very long and I always had guys that were abusive and I didn't think I deserved anything better . . . abuse is all I knew. I didn't think they loved me unless they did abuse me.

Early (childhood) use of illicit substances was evident in 9 of the 14 (64%) narratives as well. As such, drug or alcohol addiction was a problem for most. If it did not start in childhood, drug or alcohol addiction became a problem in adolescence or adulthood for all of the women in this sample.

Illustrative of many women's experiences, Tina began a lifetime of substance abuse at the age of 9 when she started drinking before school and smoking marijuana. She later used methamphetamine and became “strung out” on heroin. Looking back, she attributes her early foray into drugs to absentee parents after a divorce, a brother who “really terrorized” her, and being molested by her brother's friend. For Tina and several other women, being enmeshed in the drug scene led to criminal activity, including prostitution and selling drugs, and also abusive relationships that were challenging to escape.

At times, abusive partners introduced the women to drugs. Beth's explanation exemplified a coercive introduction to drugs:

He drank a lot. He wrecked his cars. I did all of his work for him, um, he shot me up one time to get me up out of bed to go to work. I was sound asleep and I had a big old miss [i.e., when the vein is missed]. My sister had to take me to the hospital.

## **Explanations of Criminality**

While the interviews began with questions about the women's family background, and centered on the narration of their intimate partner relationships and their involvement in the criminal justice system, the women were encouraged to tell their stories as they wished. When needed, the same six questions relating to partner/spouse influences in criminality guided the conversations, as they were on the screening instrument (i.e., have you ever . . . "committed a crime because you were threatened by a partner or spouse," "committed a crime in an effort to please a partner or spouse," "committed a crime to get drugs for a partner or spouse," "admitted to a crime that was actually committed by a partner or spouse," "lied to authorities to conceal a crime committed by a partner or spouse," or "chosen to go to jail to avoid violence towards you by a partner or spouse"). However, both the women and our coding team found it difficult to categorize their experiences accordingly. For example, in a given experience a woman may have felt threatened *and* also desired to please her abusive partner. Additionally, a woman who said that she committed one crime because she feared reprisal might have committed a subsequent crime for another reason. Similarly, women revealed that while they may have committed crimes to obtain drugs (or money for drugs) for a partner, they might have done so to please the partner or out of fear as well. So, while examples of these complex events are identifiable in the narratives, our categorization scheme, rather than unequivocal, is designed to reveal the types of situations abused women find themselves in and to summarize what in reality were complex experiences. We have attempted to include as diverse and representative narratives as space allows so as to illustrate the myriad ways in which the women spoke to the links between victimization and criminality.

### *Being Threatened*

Ten of the 14 women (71%) in the qualitative sample reported committing a crime because they were threatened by a partner or spouse. Beth's coercion into crime vis-à-vis physical abuse was clearly illustrated in the following narrative:

. . . that is when I got into a lot of my trouble. I ended up in prison. We got busted three times for drugs and growing marijuana. I wrote bad checks. He beat me up, told me to go write bad checks at *Department store*, um, I went in there three different times. I told him I couldn't go back in there cause they were going to know they were hot checks. So he was throwing me around in the parking lot. Somebody called the cops. Um, he was real abusive.

Jane's story was similar to Beth's. Her partner was a methamphetamine-addict who was paranoid, jealous, and extremely controlling. He elicited such fear and obedience in Jane that she would keep her head down when they were in a car or walking because she was afraid of being accused of flirting. She also relieved herself in bottles in the basement because, "I was afraid to go up to the bathroom because every time I did I got beat up because he said I was having sex with someone in the bathroom, even if it took me a minute." She was also threatened to commit numerous crimes. As she described:

You know cause he would set up a deal to get somebody a computer. . . he did this a couple times, but he wouldn't go do the crime and if I didn't go do the crime then I would have the living shit beat out of me. So of course I'd go do it.

Indeed, physical coercion was the most common and obvious way in which abusive partners elicited fear in the women we interviewed. Mary also reported multiple incidents of criminal activity under the fear of physical violence. She experienced severe child abuse and sexual assault by the age of 10. She left home at the age of 11 and raised herself on the streets. All her intimate partners abused her; in her words, ". . . abuse is all I knew. I didn't think they loved me unless they did abuse me." She described the ways she was threatened to commit crimes:

I had boyfriends that pulled burglaries and stuff and made me help them or, um, or they threatened me with death. And it wasn't even that I cared to live it was just that I didn't want to go by their hands.

However, threats were non-physical in nature as well. For Hillary, the coercion came in the form of her boyfriend keeping her daughter with him until she agreed to go out and sell his drugs for him:

He was like, "No, you're leaving her here and you are not getting her back until you do this for me." I was like "Fine, whatever." [Q: What was it that he wanted you to do for him?] Wanted me to go sell the speed that he had so that he could get the money to use to buy pills.

Other women revealed the ways their abusive partners exploited their children or other family members. Lara, who followed her abusive boyfriend to another state and agreed to prostitute to get money for the two of them, was surprised when his abuse, both physical and verbal, increased after she started walking the streets. She subsequently found a pimp to help her get away from him.

I wanted to get away from him but I wanted to get all my clothes and he told me that he would kill my parents, that he would set their house on fire and you know, kill my family if I didn't get him [money for] a plane ticket home.

Tina also had a partner who controlled her through prostitution and emotional abuse. On her own volition, Tina had prostituted herself previously to maintain her drug habit and the drug habits of her friends. But when an abusive and controlling partner controlled her activities and kept the money for himself, it was different. As she tells it,

When I was with Tony, I still, he ended up still making me, he ended up making me work the streets and give him money, so he would threaten me to do that. Which I never would tell anyone cause it was a big thing that I was ashamed of. I really don't know why, I worked the streets before but I always got the money.

### *Pleasing a Partner*

Eleven of the 14 women (78%) admitted to committing a crime in an effort to please a partner or spouse. Such a motivation is related to the above category regarding threats or coercion, as some of the women committed crimes in order to please (or appease) their partners in the hope of avoiding an overt threat or conflict. Certainly avoiding conflict was the motivation behind Sheila's efforts to secure drugs for her lesbian partner: "I go and I get her dope and all that shit, yeah. [Q: So you committed crimes to get her...] Make her happy, calm her down."

The same was true for Jodi, whose second husband had a strong drug addiction and constantly drained the couples' bank accounts to support his addiction. He would then get mad at Jodi for not keeping more money in the accounts. To avoid further conflict, she started embezzling money from work to replenish the accounts:

I started stealing money so that we didn't get overdrawn in the bank. He would go through patterns of not working . . . so when he wasn't working or bringing any money in and still going and spending money, we were getting even more in the hole and so I started taking from my work for over a course of like three to four years. I started doing it because I didn't want to get in trouble for being over-drafted at the bank. And then it just kind of escalated I guess and then his drug abuse and stuff got worse.

Sasha described what was presumably a mutual partnership in crime, mostly drug manufacturing and sales, but also revealed the extent to which her husband was physically violent with her. For two decades, she attempted to leave him and get clean but found she could not. This experience was reiterated in several of the women's narratives. Indeed, much of the coercion involved with the women's illegality

seemed implicit or based on the women's fear of future incidents of violence more so than on explicit commands from a partner to commit a crime.

### *Securing Drugs*

Related to committing crimes in order to please their partners were illegalities committed in order to obtain drugs for their partners. Jodi's narrative above illustrates some overlap with this motivation and the previous one related to pleasing a partner, as she embezzled to both please her husband and support his drug use. Her narrative is provided in the above section only because from her description, avoiding conflict was the pressing motivation, beyond simply a desire to secure drugs for her husband.

There is also overlap between this and the first motivation related to committing crimes due to threats, as Jane attested:

So then I met him and I am pretty hard into my use at this point and then it just escalated after I met him. Criminal activity increased I mean, just constant, bad checks, stolen credit cards, you know whatever I could do to get more dope for him and I and it was like "get me dope or I'm going to kill you." You know?

In total, 13 women (93%) admitted to such activities.

### *Taking the Blame*

Additionally, 78% (11/14) reported that they admitted to a crime that was actually committed by a partner or spouse and all but one said that they lied to authorities to conceal a crime committed by a partner or spouse. The women often took the blame for a crime either to protect a partner or out of fear of a partner's reprisal. Again, this illustrates some overlap between motivational categories. Janice offered the following reason for taking the rap for a crime that she and her partner committed "to save him, to keep him from, well, it, because he would have, we don't have three strikes you're out but he has been arrested so many times that it was better for me to take the rap than it was for him."

Beth's motivation for taking the blame for her partner was love and devotion, despite abuse:

We got busted one time for a bunch of dope in the truck. I told them it was mine cause I was so in love with him that I didn't want him to go to jail. So I ended up going to prison. Um, and he just acted like he was innocent all through this time.

Mary also explained the situation that resulted in her incarceration:

I got busted for a meth lab. . . . I didn't want to use and I wasn't using and he was bound and determined it was going to happen, it was going to be in the house . . . he got everything together for the meth lab. . . . I didn't want to cook but I knew how. So it just got to a point where I was forced to do it and luckily we got arrested before there was ever anything done. . . . And when I went to court, I took the blame for all that too. I went to jail and he went out and ran bag [i.e., sold drugs] and saw other women . . .

Admitting to crimes they did not commit was not always a coerced decision in terms of being threatened or manipulated, however. In some situations, women admitted to crimes they did not commit for the expressed purpose of going to jail. This was because jail was seen as a safe haven, a respite of sorts, from the abuse they endured in the "free world." An excerpt from Alex's interview illustrates this:

I chose to go to jail here. To clean up my past, to avoid getting beat up by him [husband] anymore and to get custody back of my daughter. Always in my head my ultimate thing was to leave him and the only way I could do that was to go to jail. And I was safe in jail. I was safe in jail. I didn't have to worry about getting beat up, you know, and when he would come to visit me, he couldn't beat me up because we were supervised.

Indeed, incarceration provided an opportunity for women to think about their options. Such a predicament, to choose jail over “freedom” in order to escape violence and plan for the future, is illustrative of the lack of alternatives these women perceived while dealing with abusive partners.

### *Lying to Authorities*

Finally, 13 of the 14 women (93%) said that they lied to authorities to conceal a crime committed by a partner or spouse. In these situations, women primarily described incidents in which they denied their partner’s abuse of themselves to the police or other authorities, rather than take the fall for a crime committed against someone else as in the former category, “taking the blame.” For instance, according to Susan, after police were alerted to incidents of domestic violence, “I would say no, you know, I accidentally fell down or something like that so he wouldn’t have to go to jail.”

In some cases, such cover-ups were coerced by the women’s partners. Cary’s husband agreed to take her to the hospital after breaking her arm but only if she lied and said she fell down the stairs:

And he said “Okay, I’ll take you to the hospital but you have to tell them, you can’t tell them I hit you, you have to tell them that you fell down the stairs.” So I had to lie when I went to the hospital and I did.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this study, we extended research on the role of violent victimization in the lives of incarcerated women offenders to women under community supervision. Qualitative interviews with a self-selected sample of abused women on probation or parole revealed the complex connections between histories of partner victimization (and in many cases, childhood abuse), substance abuse, and adult offending.

The findings concerning the histories of domestic violence for women in community corrections coincide with those of women in a variety of other correctional settings. In short, domestic violence appears to be a common thread running through the lives of women and girls involved in all aspects of the justice system. It appears that at times, domestic violence, or the threat thereof, also serves as a precipitant to crime; these women provide details on their ideas concerning the link between their intimate partner victimization and criminality through having been overtly threatened or coerced into illegal activity.

Admittedly, the findings in our qualitative interview sample were in part a product of self-selection and our eligibility requirements (an affirmative response to at least one form of partner abuse and/or linking own criminal offending to an abusive partner). However, this over-sampling of abused women and of women who self-linked their offenses to some aspect of an abusive relationship was planned and was seen as an initial route to begin to more closely examine the ways that women understand the connections between their experiences of victimization and criminal offending.

This research was not intended to provide excuses for women’s illegal behavior. Indeed, the majority of women did not offer excuses for their offenses. However, linking their crimes to their victimization was one way that they made sense of their lives. In addition, many were involved with illicit substances independent of relationships with abusive partners. Furthermore, some admitted to engaging in aggression toward their partners. Nonetheless, their words reveal for us a particular aspect of the context of women’s offending, namely the complex connections between past and present experiences of domestic violence, drug addiction, and criminal offending.

Such connections must be considered if we are ever to have hope of preventing certain types of crimes from occurring within particular contexts. Such connections must also be recognized and responded to in

current programming for women already in the justice system. To be effective, programming for women needs to be tailored to the contexts of their offending (e.g., Bloom & McDiarmid, 2000). The finding that some women perceive incarceration as a safe haven or an opportunity to “get straight” suggests that many women are lacking access to resources on the outside, are in need of assistance, and are ready and open to such programming. In fact, our finding that women choose jail or prison to escape abuse or to seek help for other problems deserves further attention in future research.

The goal of this research was also not to determine causal connections between women’s victimization and offending. Further research is needed to examine the ways in which any causal connections may be made. Indeed, many if not most battered women do not commit crimes. Continued inquiries into this area may uncover the larger set of circumstances surrounding certain women’s involvement in illegality as compared to others.

We did not systematically assess the extent to which the women in our study used violence against their intimate partners, nor to what degree they engaged in mutually aggressive relationships (e.g., Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2004). However, some examples of how the women were violent toward partners were evident in the narratives. That stated, relationships involving male-perpetrated intimate terrorism were clearly a major part of these women’s histories. Future studies need to further assess the extent to which common couple violence (Johnson, 1995) is linked to women’s (and perhaps men’s) offending. Similarly, we did not examine the extent to which women’s foray into criminal offending or substance abuse preceded violent intimate relationships; though clearly not the modal life trajectory in our sample, a few women described such contexts. Future research should examine the extent to which women’s criminal offending precedes and perhaps leads to partnerships with abusive (and substance abusing) men which then makes non-criminal behavioral choices and contexts harder to make and come by.

Yet, our findings corroborate the growing evidence in the literature and render some sort of link between victimization and offending as clear. Even in cases where their crimes may not have been connected to their victimization, the fact that a disproportionate number of women involved in the correctional system have been battered merits greater attention. Studies on women’s success within community corrections has suggested that the stresses of partner conflict and unstable homes impacts women’s ability to meet probationary and parole requirements (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Hall, Baldwin, & Prendergast, 2001). As women are increasingly brought into the criminal justice system, and subsequently into community-based corrections, they seem to be a logical population on which to focus a more holistic approach to intervention programming (Olson, Lurigio, & Seng, 2000; Pearl, 1998; Eddy & Reid, 2003). Programs are needed that help women identify their assets while they emotionally, physically, and perhaps financially, deal with and recover from current or past negative experiences including histories of intimate partner violence, addictions, and poverty. For example, Moe and Ferraro (2006) discuss how strengths-restorative therapy, detailed in van Wormer (2001), can be translated into a gender-specific program for mothers in jail. This kind of all encompassing program could also be imported into the community corrections setting where women can learn to build on their strengths while they are assisted through various recoveries and through the transition from carceral life to living in the community again.

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