



**SAFE
RETURN**

**Domestic Violence and
Prisoner Reentry:
Experiences of African American
Women and Men**

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FROM THE CO-DIRECTORS

Many states have made a commitment in recent years to support the needs of individuals leaving prison—for example, by helping them to find housing or employment or to reduce substance use. However, too few of these strategies also consider the needs of those left behind who now have a former prisoner reentering their life.

The Office on Violence Against Women created the Safe Return Initiative to help policymakers and practitioners strengthen domestic violence services for African American women and their children when they are facing the return of an intimate partner from prison. Because there has been relatively little discussion about the intersection of domestic violence and prisoner reentry, Safe Return conducted a series of focus groups with women and men who have had direct experience in managing intimate partner conflict and navigating the process of reentry. This report, a summary of lessons from those discussions, provides an important perspective on these critically important issues.

Safe Return works to build culturally specific technical capacity within and cooperation among justice institutions and community-based and faith-based organizations in order to keep women and their children safe and improve the odds of successful reentry. For training materials, recommended readings, and research on reentry, domestic violence, and African American communities, visit our web site, www.safereturn.info.

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INTRODUCTION

This report examines a significant, understudied facet of domestic violence in America: the distinctive experiences of African American women and their African American male intimate partners when those partners are transitioning from prison into the community. This is a subject that demands attention, as high rates of incarceration among African Americans are known to have a substantial, but as yet not fully understood, impact upon the African American community, where domestic violence is also a major concern.

The information presented here comes from a series of discussion groups conducted by the Safe Return Initiative (SRI or Safe Return), a partnership of the Vera Institute of Justice and the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community through a cooperative agreement with the Office on Violence Against Women. Safe Return is funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women to provide jurisdictions involved in the federal government's Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative and others with training and technical assistance on effective responses to domestic violence among African Americans confronting prisoner reentry. As part of its mandate, Safe Return sought to obtain first-hand accounts from African Americans experiencing prisoner reentry in order to better understand and share their specific concerns and challenges surrounding intimate partner violence.

This report provides practitioners and policymakers—especially advocates for domestic violence victims (and those who provide related services such as batterer intervention programming) and those who work with people transitioning from incarceration to the community (including both corrections and parole personnel)—with a better understanding of the challenges that African Americans face in the confluence of intimate partner violence and prisoner reentry.

BACKGROUND

Prisoner reentry and community reintegration are at the forefront of many current social policy debates. Each year, more than 600,000 individuals return home from state and federal prisons.¹ High rates of recidivism indicate that many of these people will be incarcerated again—a development that represents a considerable burden to the communities to which they return. Most research on prisoner reentry has focused on the influence of unemployment, substance abuse, and inadequate housing on prisoners' post-release success.² Some studies have also examined family relationships during and after imprisonment and the impact of family ties on recidivism.³ Yet there has been little research on the relationship between prisoner reentry and intimate partner violence or on the relationship between domestic violence and criminal recidivism—even though many prisoners report a history of violence against their intimate partners.⁴

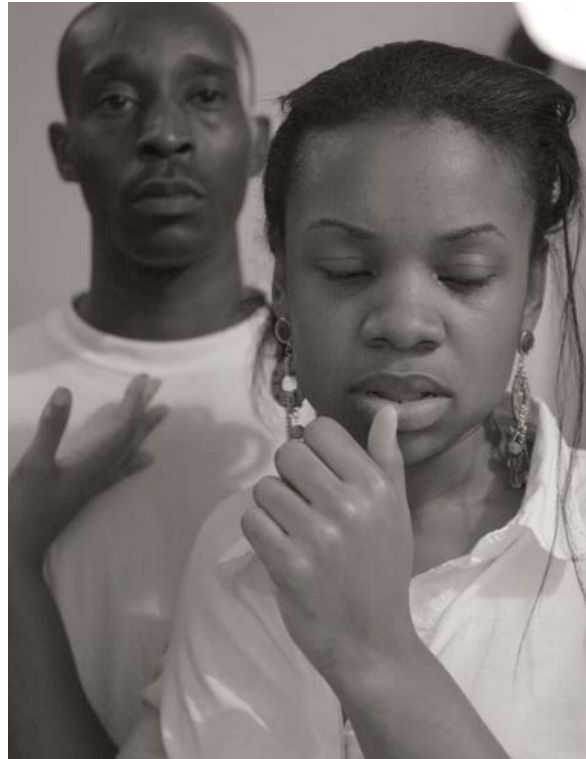
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Intimate partner violence is a serious problem in the United States. Between 1989 and 2002, 3.5 million people in the U.S. were victims of family violence (and nearly a quarter of all murders during this period were committed against a family member).⁵ In most cases, the victims are women.

The threat of intimate partner violence is particularly dire within the African American community. National crime victim survey data indicate that each year between 1992 and 1996 an average of 12 out of every 1,000 black women experienced violence by an intimate partner, as compared with fewer than 8 out of 1,000 white women.⁶ One study of national crime victimization data revealed that between 1993 and 1998, African Americans of both genders were victimized by intimate partners at significantly higher rates than individuals of other races. Moreover, African American women experienced intimate partner violence at a rate 35 percent higher than white women and two and one-half times higher than women of other races. African American men were subject to intimate partner violence at a rate 62 percent higher than white men and two and one-half times higher than men of other races.⁷

Women who experience the highest rates of non-lethal partner violence include black women, women between the ages 16 and 24, low-income women, women who live in rental housing, and women who live in urban areas.⁸ This demographic profile parallels that of black males with the highest rates of incarceration.⁹

Domestic homicide, which accounts for 3.5 percent of all homicides among black men and 24 percent of all homicide among black women, is likewise an area of particular concern for African American populations.¹⁰ African Americans are more likely than members of other racial groups to be involved in domestic homicides characterized by a reciprocal pattern of abuse. In fact, a study of murder cases in eight urban counties found that African American men and women were almost equally likely to kill their spouses: 47 percent of African American victims of domestic homicide were male. In contrast, only 38 percent of white victims of domestic homicide were male.¹¹



INCARCERATION RATES AND RECIDIVISM

African American communities are disproportionately affected by issues related to incarceration and prisoner reentry because prison populations in the U.S. are disproportionately African American. African Americans represent 45 percent of all inmates serving sentences of one year or longer; whites, in contrast, account for 34 percent of all inmates, while Hispanics account for 18 percent.¹² An estimated 10 percent of black males between the ages of 25 and 29 are incarcerated, as compared with 2.4 percent of Hispanic males and about 1.2 percent of white males in the same age group.¹³ African American males have a 29 percent lifetime chance of serving at least one year in prison—a rate six times higher than that for white males.¹⁴

The impact of incarceration on African American family life and community stability is compounded by high rates of recidivism among prisoners in general. A national study of prisoners published in 1994 indicated that only 45 percent of parolees successfully complete their parole term. Within three years of release, 67 percent of former inmates are rearrested for a serious offense; 52 percent return to prison for a new criminal offense or a violation of parole.¹⁵

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND REENTRY

Imprisonment is a major source of stress and relationship disruption between incarcerated men and their intimate partners.¹⁶ Although fewer than half of incarcerated men are married at the time of their arrest, many marriages end during incarceration.¹⁷ One study of men in prison reported that less than half of those who reported being married at the time of their conviction were still married when the study was conducted. Prisoners' wives were seldom their most frequent visitors, and they were prisoners' most important source of support in only 50 percent of cases.¹⁸ Non-marital intimate relationships, which frequently end when the man is imprisoned, are also severely strained by incarceration.¹⁹

Several studies indicate that men experience significant levels of conflict with their intimate female partners both during and following incarceration.²⁰ One study found that “conflict between husbands and wives and with former partners...was a central subject in most of the inmates' descriptions of their current family relations.”²¹ Concerns about fidelity—in particular, men's suspicions about their wives' or girlfriends' behavior during the period of forced separation—was a source of significant conflict.²²

Relationships with children and children's mothers represent another common source of conflict for incarcerated men. For many, such conflict arises from the fear of being replaced by another man as a father figure.²³ Incarcerated men also report that conflict with an estranged wife or girlfriend can negatively affect one's relationship with any children the couple may have had.²⁴ Among the other identified sources of conflict are men's efforts to monitor and control their partners from inside prison; a wife or girlfriend's inability to satisfy an incarcerated man's emotional and economic needs; men's inability to meet a wife or girlfriend's economic expectations after leaving prison; and men returning to “fast living” or street life upon release.²⁵

METHODOLOGY

DISCUSSION GROUP SITES

The discussion groups cited in this report were conducted in four cities, all of which have either formal prisoner reentry programs or large parolee populations, and in three correctional facilities, all of which release significant numbers of prisoners to urban communities each year. The cities were Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Nashville, Tennessee; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and New York, New York. The correctional facilities were the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York; the Racine Correctional Institution in Racine, Wisconsin; and the Correctional Development Center in Nashville, Tennessee. These institutions were chosen not only because they release large numbers of prisoners to urban areas, but also because they were willing to provide facilitators with access to study participants, usually as a result of prior affiliation with Safe Return or other projects of the Vera Institute of Justice or the Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community.

DISCUSSION GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The discussion groups targeted four distinct participant groups. For the women, these included:

- Women whose husbands or boyfriends were incarcerated and who expected to be released within a year and
- Women whose husbands or boyfriends had been released from prison and were on parole for two years or less.

The targeted men were:

- Men who were incarcerated and expected to be released within a year and
- Men who had been released from prison and were on parole for two years or less.

To qualify, participants had to be African American and 18 years of age or older. The female participants were not the intimate partners of the male participants.

To recruit participants, Safe Return relied on the assistance of prison and parole staff and personnel from local social service agencies. The recruiters—who operated semi-independently—underwent a one-day training and were given a standard approach script for each of the four target groups as well as guidelines for identifying potential study participants. As 8 to 10 participants were expected for each group, recruiters were asked to identify 12 individuals to allow for attrition.

Prison program and parole staff used several methods to recruit male participants. First, they distributed flyers in prisons and at parole offices and other locations such as community service centers and program offices. They also made announcements at institutional and community activities such as classes and organizational meetings. Finally, they approached individual prisoners and parolees, invited them to participate if interested, and asked them to spread the word about the discussion groups. Local social service agencies used similar methods to recruit female participants. These agencies included African American Family Services, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota; the YWCA of Nashville, Tennessee; and the Osborne Association and Amachi, both in New York, New York.²⁶

Six discussion groups were conducted with men. Discussion groups for men on parole were conducted in Milwaukee, Nashville, and New York; those for men in prison were conducted in the three correctional institutions cited earlier. A total of 59 men participated, with 4 to 14 men in each group. The prison groups were conducted in prison classrooms or offices. To ensure that the meetings were confidential, administrators agreed to keep prison staff outside of the interview rooms. Two of the parolee groups were held at community agencies; one took place at a church. It should be noted that while most of the men were or had been incarcerated for serious felonies, this was not always the case. Moreover, no attempt was made to deliberately select men who had been convicted of intimate partner violence—although some admitted to such behavior during the discussion group.

Five discussion groups were conducted with women: two in Minneapolis, two in New York, and one in Nashville. The number of female participants totaled 29, with three to six women in each group.

Although the study design called for two distinct women's groups—one for women whose partners were on parole and one for women whose partners were in prison—for several reasons at each site the participating populations differed slightly from these targets. The Nashville group and the New York parole group had mixed populations; they included both women who had partners currently in prison and women who had partners who were on parole. Participants for both discussion groups arrived at the Nashville site at the same time, and there were too few women to conduct separate group interviews. In New York, facilitators did not learn that the parole group was mixed until well after the interview had started. Also, while all of the recruiters sought women who had been involved with incarcerated or formerly incarcerated men, some used having been a victim of domestic violence as a criterion as well.

Ultimately, the women's sessions included two additional categories in the mixed discussion groups:

- Women who did not intend to reunite with currently or formerly incarcerated partners (in some cases, they had not seen or heard from the men in years) and
- Women who were involved with men they had met after the men had left prison.

The participation of these additional groups was not considered problematic, however, as all drew upon experiences that were relevant to the discussion groups' purposes.

DISCUSSION GROUP PROCEDURES

Each discussion group lasted about two hours and was guided by a series of structured, open-ended questions. The questions were phrased in a manner that allowed participants to provide general answers based on broad knowledge of a topic or to relate their own personal experiences. The interview guides were based on themes found in the domestic violence and prisoner family literature and on Safe Return staff's prior experi-

ences in group discussions with African American former prisoners and their female intimate partners. The questions covered the impact of incarceration on families, preparation for reentry and the return home, male/female relationships, community support, and conflict and abuse. While the questions for men and women often covered similar ground, they were not identical.

Each discussion group was conducted by two African American facilitators, both of whom also conducted the individual interviews that followed. All of the facilitators had backgrounds in criminal justice, social work, or related fields and experience in research interviewing and family services. They also attended a study orientation and training session prior to conducting the interviews.

Throughout the group interviews, facilitators reminded participants not to reveal information that made them uncomfortable. They also diverted the conversation when participants began to ask each other sensitive personal questions and sought to keep the discussion focused on general thematic concerns. Although the group interviews followed a standard format, the responses often generated discussions that addressed more than one question. They also revealed information that, though of interest, was not of direct concern to the study.

Each discussion group interview was taped and then transcribed. In addition, an associate took notes summarizing major discussion points in each interview.

UNDERSTANDING THE DISCUSSION GROUP CONTENT

Analysis of the information from the discussion groups was guided by coding schemes drawn from the group interview data. Using a transcript from one men's group, the lead authors of this report independently developed a list of thematic codes for the responses to each interview question. After review and discussion of these preliminary code lists, they developed a definitive set of thematic codes for each question. The same process was used to develop a separate coding scheme for the women's interviews.

Each group interview transcript was then coded using either the men's or women's coding scheme and a set of coding guidelines. For each transcript, the coding of each interview question entailed identifying predominant points of view, contrasting points of view, and quotes to support each code selection. Project staff responsible for coding also identified new conceptual categories as they emerged and made interpretive notes for each interview. These procedures provided a standard framework for describing the issues and concerns conveyed by the discussion group participants.

The discussion group content presented here is based on this analysis and interpretation. In addition to exploring broad themes and patterns related to domestic violence and prisoners' return home, the authors have used participants' own words to describe their experiences.

MEN IN PRISON AND ON PAROLE

Prisoners and parolees' perspectives can contribute significantly to our understanding of the confluence of intimate partner violence and prisoner reentry. Their views also provide a context for the experiences of women involved in intimate relationships with men under correctional supervision. For these two reasons, this report begins with a discussion of the men's discussion groups. Guided by facilitators, the men in these groups discussed conflict, violence, and their experiences with wives and girlfriends during and after incarceration. Findings are presented in four major categories:

- Impact of incarceration on intimate relationships,
- Sources of conflict between men in prison and their female partners,
- Challenges and conflict associated with reentry, and
- Violence against women during reentry.

IMPACT OF INCARCERATION ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Incarceration negatively affects the wives and girlfriends of prisoners. Men in prison and men on parole both generally agreed that when a man goes to prison it can be very stressful for his wife or girlfriend. They identified several prominent stressors that affect an intimate partner. Among the most important, they said, is the economic strain that results when a man is no longer available to help support his household. One participant observed:

Man: [Imprisonment] changes the whole structure of your relationship. It puts the financial strain on her totally. What you all were doing together, now it [all falls] on her. And she may not be able [to do by herself] what you all were both doing, you know, as one. She may have to pick up two jobs. She may have to pick up two-and-a-half jobs. It puts a big strain on her. Especially if there are kids involved.

An equally important concern was that, while imprisoned, men are unable to satisfy their wives' and girlfriends' emotional and sexual needs. Like Terrance, below, several participants expressed a sophisticated understanding of how an increase in economic pressure could combine with unfulfilled emotional and sexual needs to strain a relationship.

Terrance: When a man goes to prison and his wife or girlfriend [remains] in the community, it leaves the door open for a whole lot of other issues, such as the bills being paid, where's the next meal going to come from, intimacy, things like that. That sort of pushes the girlfriend away, [and] she might go and seek affection or support from somebody else. And then the man that's in prison cops an attitude or feels kind of bad about being left out or forgotten. It creates a bad atmosphere between the two.

Several participants noted that a woman's resentment or anger toward her partner for having committed the acts that led to his imprisonment may be a source of stress as well.

Challenges in maintaining a relationship during incarceration. A man's incarceration also places constraints on his ability to maintain a relationship. Three constraints were identified as most significant.

Hotep, below, discusses one of these constraints—the restricted access to communication with wives and girlfriends.

Hotep: The individual commits a crime, right. He comes to prison, and the way they got it set up, the limited this and limited that. And the families...you can't do certain things; you can't even hug them or kiss them for a certain amount of time, you know what I mean. And [prison administrators are] limiting you, and they're constantly doing everything in their power to keep you separated from your significant other.

Another major obstacle concerns the difficulty in coming to terms with the hurt and disappointment one may have caused one's partner.

Quack: It's kind of hard when you had a good relationship out there and you end up hurting that person by coming to prison, and everything is kind of hard for her. I constantly pray for her, and I try to correspond and write letters.

Finally, exposure to the informal social world of prison culture may influence an incarcerated man's attitudes and behavior toward women. The significance of this influence is exemplified by the ways in which men in the prison discussion groups referred to their wives and girlfriends. Often, their implicit message was that, in their view, wives and girlfriends were obligated to remain loyal to their men.

Kvee: One view of seeing a woman is [that she is] your errand person. She [is] taking care of the business for you while you're in here because she's out there.

Junior: A lot of times the stigma in an environment like this is that the average inmate classifies the woman, their significant other, as being their second mama—somebody they can count on to be there for every beck and call. [They] want their call to be received. Want money still in their book. Want to keep the perm in their hair, the tennis shoes on their feet.

In her study of prisoners' wives, Laura Fishman noted that “Enforced separation placed the wives in a position where they were more apt to support than be supported, nurture rather than be nurtured.”²⁷ The language used by some men in the prison discussion groups appeared to confirm that finding while also highlighting the fact that they often feel dependent on their female partners.

While men who referred to their wives or girlfriends as errand girls or second mamas often maintained a measure of respect for and emotional attachment to their partners, those who characterized women as slaves evinced neither respect nor love.

Terrance: One view of women is they just there to do what I want them to do. Slaves...somebody there to be there at your every beck and call.

All of these attitudes toward women can precipitate conflict between men and their intimate female partners, both during incarceration and after. Insofar as they do, they represent another challenge to maintaining relationships.

Other factors that constrain incarcerated men's ability to maintain healthy relationships with their wives or girlfriends include difficulty coping with being vulnerable while in relationships, lack of clarity about the status of their relationships, and frustration at the inability to satisfy a partner's emotional, sexual, and economic needs.

Positive effects of imprisonment on intimate relationships. A minority of participants reported that a man's incarceration might have positive effects on intimate relationships. Several suggested, for example, that a household might become more peaceful as a result of the man's absence. Like 'Trane, below, they also implied that being imprisoned may also force a man to communicate more effectively with his partner.

'Trane: Here in prison, you can't do but so much. And so you begin to talk...I've seen relationships actually get stronger because the people evolve. I certainly would not advocate prison as an environment for a relationship, but sometimes [relationships] get stronger in spite of [it] because of the individual[s] and because of [their] history...Particularly in our community, pressure can bring you closer together.

It was also pointed out that imprisonment may help a man recognize that he has problems and that this can strengthen his relations with women if it spurs him to work toward personal transformation. For example, an incarcerated man who comes to recognize that women have emotional and sexual needs—another positive consequence identified as a possible result of incarceration—may be less likely to resort to violence against a wife or girlfriend who became sexually involved with someone else while he was away.

Man: Turn the tables, switch it around. [Imagine we're] out there, and they are in [prison]. What would we be out there doing? You got to come home with an open mind. You got to understand that, hey, I been locked up for 10 years. She stuck with me for the whole 10 years, I got to try to look over what she did to survive out there.

Finally, the enforced separation from one's partner, together with the recognition that she may be subject to significant psychological and economic pressure—especially if she is raising children on her own—can increase men's appreciation for their partners.

Ikey: I [will] come out of prison with newfound respect for women. Any woman that can put her life on hold for you while you're incarcerated—you know, while your hands [are] tied behind your back—and she able to stand up, independently, and get your back, I have all the respect in the world for her.

SOURCES OF CONFLICT BETWEEN MEN IN PRISON AND THEIR FEMALE PARTNERS

Discussion group participants also discussed the ways in which they believe incarcerated men cause conflict with their wives or girlfriends, as well as ways in which, in their view, wives and girlfriends cause conflict.

Men's views of how they create conflict. According to a number of widely accepted theories of domestic violence, intimate partner conflict that results in violence is often rooted in men's efforts to control their partner's behavior.²⁸ A number of participants appeared to confirm this dynamic. Indeed, many cited “trying to control wives and girlfriends from inside prison”—to which some added harassment or making threats—as a primary source of conflict.

Among the most common ways in which incarcerated men seek to control their partners is by demanding that they visit on a regular basis, accept collect phone calls, send money, and provide them with books, televisions, CDs, snacks, shoes, clothing, and other items. As several participants pointed out, such regular and onerous demands can lead to conflict, especially when wives or girlfriends are unable or unwilling to meet them. Nez Perce, for example, described being “greedy and selfish” as the primary cause of conflict.

Nez Perce: In other words, wanting too much out of her when she's trying to take care of you and her and the bills and pay the rent at the same time. You know, being selfish and not paying attention to that and just worrying about yourself: “I saw these nice little Tims [Timberland boots], cop that for me.” And then if she says something to you like “Listen, pop, I don't think I can do it,” [then you say], “You wasn't acting like that when I was buying you this [and] that.”

Making accusations of infidelity represents another common way incarcerated men can cause conflict with their partners.

Day Day: [Say] you're stressing...[and] she didn't meet her obligation on time, and so you get angry with her and you tell her, “Well, I know you're seeing him and I know you're doing this and I know you're doing that and, yeah, yeah, I know all about it. I got spies on you.” You know, all that stuff you're telling her is really stressing her out.

One participant suggested that it is not uncommon for accusations of unfaithfulness to escalate to harassment.

Man: I've seen over and over and over since I've been here, guys will get on the phone, and they'll accuse their wives or their women of cheating with somebody else. I mean, it's never just a regular conversation. Or it'll start off that way, and then he'll end up accusing her.

In some instances, the men reported, accusations of unfaithfulness can even lead to threats of violence.

Other ways in which incarcerated men were thought to cause conflict included lending credence to “street news” about one’s wife or girlfriend and maintaining a relationship with another woman. (Some incarcerated men maintain multiple relationships by juggling phone calls and visiting hours.)

Men’s views of how women create conflict. Participants in the prison discussion group also discussed ways in which they believed wives and girlfriends contribute to relationship conflict. While the authors recognize that it is inappropriate to blame victims for another person’s abusive behavior, we include these assertions in order to give a complete profile of what the men understood to be the dynamics of violence. The actions of women that the male participants identified as contributing to violence included having a second relationship with another man, communicating a “sugarcoated” message about the state of her relationship to the incarcerated person (as opposed to being honest), not taking care of family business, and taking advantage of the changed power dynamic to “get back” at an incarcerated partner for past wrongs.

The primary way that female partners were thought to contribute to conflict while men are incarcerated or transitioning to the community was by becoming romantically and sexually involved with other men. Terrance’s response, below, to questions about women’s actions that might create conflict is part of a pattern of findings pertaining to a woman’s sexual unfaithfulness that suggests that these men were preoccupied with looking for evidence of their female partners’ involvement with other men.

Terrance: Getting out, knowing that your girlfriend has, or your ex-girlfriend or whatever, has another boyfriend, and he’s possibly living at the house in which you left your girlfriend in before you got incarcerated. To find out, well, upon your release to find out that she had another person in your ride and in your bed.

CHALLENGES AND CONFLICT ASSOCIATED WITH REENTRY

Contextual challenges men confront during reentry. While most incarcerated men eagerly await their release, many find that the transition from prison to life in the community is fraught with challenges. Not all of these challenges have a direct bearing on intimate relationships, but they do represent the context in which reentry takes place. The degree to which men succeed in coping with these challenges can influence their relationships.

As men in prison anticipated, and as men on parole confirmed, finding a job and a place to live are crucial; meeting these needs is the necessary foundation for coping with the other challenges associated with reentry. Several participants pointed out that the lack of a decent job can complicate efforts to reunite with a wife or girlfriend. This is particularly true if the man, in his role as husband, boyfriend, or father, is expected to be a provider. Young Diesel and Gold described the related challenges of staying off the streets and avoiding the negative peer influence that often accompanies street life.

Young Diesel: Coming out of jail, we don’t have nothing to fall back on. So, we go to what we know: what’s going [to] get us the fast money; what’s going [to] help us support our family. I’m saying, who’s going [to] help us pay that 550 rent?... And I don’t even, I don’t got no job, you know.

Gold: I would say one of the biggest challenges for me is the streets because [there’s] a lot of temptation out there. I’m talking about drugs, hustling, choosing who you going to mess with...I’ll just say the streets.

For some respondents, the most significant challenge involved coming to terms with the hurt and disappointment that their friends and family suffered as a result of their past behavior.

Ikey: The biggest challenge I guess I’ve faced is building the relationship back with my family—the trust and, you know, just building a solid relationship with my family, my kids, my father, you know, my cousins. Because of your crime. Your family may not know all these things about you before you get locked up.



Osbar: The main challenge that an individual returning into society must face is establishing a relationship [with his] spouse or mom [and] dad....A lot of times we burn bridges between our family members and people that love us....[T]hese individuals are close to us and...we ran over them.

Finally, some respondents noted that living up to the conditions of parole could be a challenge.

Interpersonal challenges men confront during reentry. While some of the difficulty of reestablishing relationships after prison can be attributed to the simple fact that reentry entails dramatic changes for former prisoners and their partners, the discussion groups were extremely aware that men's actions after they are released sometimes create or aggravate conflict with their wives and girlfriends. Problematic actions included returning to illegal street activity, failing to fulfill promises made in prison, maintaining a relationship with another woman, and trying to control the house.

The most commonly cited conflict-causing behaviors included "getting back into the streets," using drugs, and spending an inordinate amount of time with male peers. The men described these behaviors as particularly significant because they often are perceived by wives and girlfriends as evidence of a man failing to live up to promises to turn his life around, to uphold his commitment to the long-term stability of his family, and to pursue more conventional behaviors upon his return to the community.

Me: I feel one thing where we make our mistake at, you know what I mean, as men coming out of prison, going back out there, we on the fold or we face-to-face with all these promises: "Baby, when I get out there, and when I get there..." you know what I mean? But then when we get out there, [we start] making our turns, you know what I mean? We're making a turn.

Terrance: One thing that I did was I went back to my old friends, and I started using drugs and hanging out in the poolrooms, in the old neighborhoods, and things like that. Bad associations spoil you for happiness. So that's what I did. I went and I stayed away from home.

Achieving a stable relationship during reentry. While discussion group participants were very aware of the ways recently released men cause conflict in their intimate relationships, they also expressed some understanding of what such men ought to do to make their relationships more stable. The most important attitudinal and behavioral changes they discussed involved making and following through on a commitment to become a better man. The behaviors they cited that reflect this commitment include being honest, remaining monogamous, practicing trust and forgiveness with one's partner, accepting changes in the partner's life, and showing appreciation for her support during and following incarceration.

Participants who were serving or had served long sentences were more likely than others to express the view that men should use prison to transform themselves into better men—and therefore better husbands, boyfriends, and parents. Hence, transformation in prison was seen as the catalyst for the types of attitudes and behaviors that could contribute to stable relationships.

Nez Perce: When a person is in [prison], he doesn't really have nothing but time to think. So...you think about [what's] important. And you tend to think, "I was doing that when I was home. I could have done this better. I could have paid more attention. I could have been a better father." You know, you start thinking about these things, and they start falling into place. And that's also about the children, too. You grow and you're growing up inside of prison, but you're growing up the right way. By informing yourself and thinking about [what you've done wrong] in the past, and moving forward, [you build] new foundations for when you go home.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DURING REENTRY

Conflict is a common part of any intimate relationship, but if either party does not know how to effectively manage it, violence can follow. The previous section identified common sources of conflict between men returning from prison and their wives or girlfriends. Discussion group participants suggested that some of these sources of conflict were more likely than others to escalate beyond conflict and lead to violence. Most significant among these was evidence or rumors of infidelity on the part of one's wife or girlfriend.

***Man:** Catch her with a man. Or she's pregnant. Now, those things right there will cause a man to really go after the woman. Because sometimes women can be so devious [as] far as talking bad to him on the phone, not accepting his calls, letting some other guy drive his car or [having] somebody else there in the home. Basically, the things that make men go off on their wives or girlfriends is [being] with another man, [being] pregnant [by another man], [letting] another man drive their car, [letting] another man [live] in the house, or catching them with another man. I think these are the basic things that make men commit violent acts.*

Several participants cited loyalty as grounds that they felt might justify violent behavior toward female intimate partners. The idea that women are obligated to remain loyal was particularly strong among men whose wives or girlfriends knew that the financial support and material goods their partners provided were derived from criminal activities.

***Hotep:** I think it's wrong for a female to go with another man...when I'm incarcerated. I mean, if that was my female before I came to prison. Because if your partner go rob a bank or something and y'all going to go 50-50, right, and he gives you 30 percent, you ain't going to be mad?...Now, most people, they committed crimes with their spouse. I mean, with their woman, right. And she knew what type of lifestyle you living...and she was benefiting big. This is how we live. That's how you get your big color TVs and all that sh*t.*

Other factors that discussion group participants cited as potential catalysts to violence were economic pressure; displaced anger about having been in prison; the perception that a wife or girlfriend is not taking care of a family's business; a wife or girlfriend challenging a man to do right or to live up to promises he may have made; and a wife or girlfriend using parole as a tool to threaten or retaliate against her partner.

Avoiding violence during reentry. When asked how men returning from prison might defuse conflict and avoid using violence against their wives or girlfriends, the parole discussion group participants suggested several strategies. The most common suggestion was to walk away from any situation that might lead to violence. Other participants recommended that men avoid women who they felt might provoke them, and some advised recognizing the legal consequences of violence against women.

***Greedy:** All that I can recommend is to walk away. That's the best thing to do when arguing with a female, is to walk away. Especially in Wisconsin because they can say anything and you go to jail for domestic violence for yelling at your girlfriend in Milwaukee. So, walk away.*

***CP:** I came up through the ages where...if a woman called me a punk and told me to kiss her *ss, I mean, that was just like unacceptable...you had to do something. I'm serious. But then, you know, that's the way I was influenced to think. But now...if I go into a situation and I know that this woman might be mouthy, you know, flip at the mouth or something like that, I don't even talk about things that [might] put her in a position to call me out....When I get around people, if I see women talking about "this [punk]," see, I don't even try to talk to them...I don't even want to be challenged like that...[I] try to avoid [it]. You know what I'm saying? And I think, doing that, you can just keep the peace.*



WOMEN WHOSE INTIMATE PARTNERS WERE MEN IN PRISON OR ON PAROLE

The women who participated in the discussion groups spoke about what it is like to be involved with a man who is under correctional supervision. They also discussed how criminal justice and social service agencies could protect them from domestic violence while supporting their husbands or boyfriends' successful transition from prison to the community. Findings from the group interviews are presented under five broad topics:

- Reunification;
- Children and their fathers;
- Definitions of domestic violence;
- Corrections staff, family support, and women's safety; and
- Domestic violence and community support.

REUNIFICATION AFTER INCARCERATION

Women who participated in the discussion groups indicated that it is very difficult for families to reunite following a man's return home from prison. Pre-prison family experiences, the prison stay itself, and the post-prison environment all present challenges to post-prison reunification. In some cases, couples' violent histories prior to incarceration preclude reunification. Other couples break up while the man is incarcerated—sometimes through mutual consent, but often because the woman chooses to move on with her life. For those couples who maintain a bond during incarceration, rebuilding a life together once the man leaves prison is very hard to do.

Women's concerns about reunification. Some of the women did not want to reunify with their incarcerated partners. Those with partners in prison for domestic violence charges or for acts of violence against other family members were most vocal about their reluctance. Some, like Tina, Vickie, and Carlotta, described terrible crimes that had been committed against them and expressed fear that their former partners would try to hurt or even kill them after being released.

Tina: Like I said, a second chance caused me to get cut up...I almost lost my life, you know, with a relationship. I had to have three operations...I have scars on my back...he burned me so bad on my back. I have no love for him. I don't want to be around him. I don't want him around me. I don't want to talk to him. I don't want to see him. I have nightmares about him. I have dreams. I mean, it just hurts so bad for a man that you love so bad to hurt me like he did.

Vickie: I just, I couldn't trust him no more. I wouldn't want him around me or my kids. So, I'm afraid. I'm still afraid of him. I just couldn't trust him.

Carlotta: I testified against him so he is in there. My life has been a lot better with him out of my life, and I don't have to be like looking and every time I go outside wondering if he's gonna roll up on me or whatever.

In addition to past experience, some of the women's fears were based on threats made by their partner while in prison. In other cases, it was grounded in knowledge of what other men have done to their wives or girlfriends after leaving prison.

Several women who were involved with men who had served previous prison sentences for offenses not related to domestic violence also expressed concerns about reunifying. The belief that the men would resume old lifestyles that were not conducive to family well-being and wind up back in prison again was an ongoing

theme throughout the group discussions. The “in and out of prison” routine led some to decide to terminate the relationship while the man was in prison or to consider not living with him after he was released.

Woman: But when they get to just constantly going to jail, just keep going and going, and you've been with this person for years...you just get tired of it.

Challenges to maintaining a relationship during incarceration. Maintaining a viable intimate relationship during incarceration is extremely difficult. The economic costs associated with visiting, talking by phone, and sending men money for personal items is paramount. In addition, some women said they did not have the time or the inclination to make the emotional commitment that men in prison need or desire.

Tina: When they are in prison, they be expecting money and for you to visit. And if you can't make a visit, it's conflict. And when you've got bills and you've got kids and they done left you out here alone, you cannot send money all the time to them. I wanted to do what I could, but then all the time I couldn't.

Miss Goldberg: I wasn't married to him. And it's like I was married. And it's like when he's doing time in there, I was doing time out here. It was like I was imprisoned in my own home. Waiting on his calls, or something. And like, "Oh God, I gotta write him a letter before the week is out or else he's gonna think I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing." And it's stressful. It's real stressful.

Chantie spoke of the enormous emotional investment involved in maintaining relationships during incarceration. Her comments are especially revealing given that her partner's jail sentence was short—nine months.

Chantie: After a while it took a toll on me because I had to do other things in order for me to maintain, to live you know, because you made your decision and you know you had to live yours. And then you just get mad because I can't make every visit. So then finally I just cut communication. But I still had love for him.

Several women saw men's insecurities and concerns about their partners becoming involved with other men as a major source of conflict among couples. Sexual needs and lack of physical contact are at the center of many relationship controversies. According to several women, men and women accuse each other of having other sexual and romantic partners, whether or not such accusations are grounded in fact.

Chantie: I'm going to tell you, the biggest conflict is when he's in there and somebody goes up and says, "She's talking to someone else." I'm speaking from Chantie's point of view, because other than that, everything is good. The letters are coming in. I love, I care, I this, I that. I send him a little money. I take the children to see you. But when you go see him: "I heard you were out there..." That is the biggest conflict you can have with a man in jail.

Oprab: Well, I know that my husband, he used to think, like the first time he went to jail, he used to always accuse me of cheating on him, thinking that I was cheating on him while he was in there.

Mary: Well, my son's father, he's always accusing me of cheating on him and not coming to see him.

Holly: I think it's the sex, you know. They want to know why you don't want to have sex, you know.



Men's concerns about infidelity are not always unfounded, however. While some of the women said they remained faithful to their incarcerated mates, others stated that they had been involved with other men while maintaining a relationship with their incarcerated partner. Still others said that they had placed the relationship with their incarcerated partner on hold, promising or suggesting that they would resume the relationship once their partner was released. Beyonce and Chantie's statements reflect some of the range of attitudes toward fidelity.

Beyonce: Yeah, in the beginning I did go visit him...it was like in the early years...you know, the first two or three years he did. But through the years, I moved on with my life. Maybe he was bitter you know because he thought I was supposed to stick by his side. Unfortunately, that's how things happen. I can't wait on you, you know.

Chantie: [Speaking of comments made to her partner] Just go and do your nine months. I'll be here when you get out. But you're gonna have to change. You're gonna have to come back and be a better man than what you were. Or don't make the same mistake that you made. Before you were a good man, but you're entitled to a mistake. But don't keep making your mistake.

Post-release challenges to relationships. While women who intend to reunite with their incarcerated mates are usually pleased when their partners return home, reunited couples face many challenges. Women in the discussion groups indicated that men's adaptation to prison life impairs their ability to be good husbands and fathers when they return home. They sometimes referred to this adaptation as a "prison mentality." In addition, they noted that because prison relieves men of adult roles and responsibilities, it can foster a childlike dependency. As a result, men who return home often struggle to fulfill adult roles—a dynamic that several women characterized as problematic.

Miss Goldberg: I believe once a man goes to prison, they get the feeling of being comfortable [there]...They keep going back there, and they're not trying to change.

Holly: Once they come home, they still have that prison mentality in them...[My son] did three years...and he's like paranoid [about] everything....It's just their whole mentality [when] they come out. They have to get that jail out of them.

The difficulty many men have finding a job that pays a livable wage was recognized as a major obstacle to successful reunification as well. For many men leaving prison, a criminal record, minimal job skills, and limited exposure to the changing job market make finding work especially daunting. However, some of the women viewed these handicaps as excuses that men use to avoid changing their ways.

Most of the female participants felt that unemployment among husbands or boyfriends returning from prison caused tension in their relationship. Women wanted their partners to be able to "carry their own weight," to take care of children, and to contribute to household upkeep, they said. They did not expect men who had just been released to have much money, and they understood that it is difficult for a former prisoner to get back on his feet. They also understood that a man returning home from prison would probably want some of the same material possessions that others have. But the euphoria associated with a man's return home can fade quickly if he fails to find a way of meeting his own material needs and contributing to the couple's finances. Relationships in which the man constantly asks for (or demands) money are at risk for conflict and violence.

Holly: And then with, you know, him wanting the new sneakers and they want all the clothes, and they don't have a job and you can't find a job. What do they do when they come out? He can't find a job anyway.



Dimples: Let's say he's coming to live with me, so that's another burden...[T]here's already three in my house now, okay. So, now what am I going to do with a man that's not [working]? I'm not going to say he's not going to do anything because there is no way you're going to come in my house and don't try to help yourself, but it's still going to be a burden for a while.

In addition, the women noted that unemployment often impairs men's self-esteem and causes them to feel inadequate in relation to others. The resulting insecurity sometimes leads to acts of violence.

Quincy: I'm going to be the one. I'm going to be the punch, punch up. He be punching at me because he can't find a job.

Simone: [Not being able to find a job] affects their self esteem and their confidence, and it affects their manhood....It creates anger in them, and then we, the females, have to deal with it.

Some women suggested that men's efforts to assert themselves as authority figures in their families can also make reunification difficult. Often, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the man has been away for some time—in some cases, longer than the couple has been together. During the time spent apart, both partners' ideas and expectations about the relationship may have changed considerably.

Whitney: It's like he wants to be my daddy and tell me what I can do and what I can't do because he done been to prison. And that's what we argue about all the time because I won't let him control me.

Further, some men return to street life after their release, either as a means of making a living, because it is familiar, or because they enjoy it—even though their involvement in drugs, crime, and gang activity can place their partners', their children's, and their own safety at risk.

Samantha: [My boyfriend] gets out of the car and starts throwing those gang signs [to another man]. So I'm thinking, "Oh, those boys ain't seen each other in a long time..." It wasn't even a whole two minutes, just that fast he gets shot in the face.

Even positive changes that an incarcerated man undergoes can create stresses in a relationship. A woman may feel that she no longer knows a husband or boyfriend who has undergone (or who claims to have undergone) a transformation while in prison. This is particularly true of religious transformations. Moreover, some of the women questioned the sincerity of a partner's newfound faith.

Tina: A lot of men get locked up, they turn their soul religious. Then they get out, and they want to make changes. But then they haven't changed.

Consuela: And then you get out and you say you got religion. When you get out you never once put on a suit to go to church. Never once sitting in God's house. And then it gets worse and worse.

Making relationships work. Women who participated in the discussion groups indicated that couples who reunite after imprisonment face many obstacles in making their relationships work. In addition to the disruption in normal intimate relationships, a couple must also deal with changes related to the male's criminal status and return to the community. Relationships that endure, they said, are usually characterized by strong emotional bonds and a willingness to work through problems as they arise. Some women related that their mindset about how to handle their husband or boyfriend's return was important.



Liz Taylor: I have to be open to the things he's coming out to—like, you know, to just be there for him, instead of saying, "I'm going to be there and give him a chance," but then be against him.

Kathy: If you give them a chance [to better themselves], they will see that somebody out there cares for them. And maybe they will start caring for themselves as well.

Judy: Our friendship plays a big part, and trust is so very big in our relationship.

Several women stated that men in prison make many promises in order to maintain relationships with their intimate partners. These promises tend to be future-oriented, though some are grounded in current behavior. They promise to treat their wives or girlfriends better, to never hit or beat them again, and to get a legitimate job. They may also try to demonstrate how they have changed by going to church, participating in prison programs, adopting different ways of speaking, or showing unaccustomed affection in letters and during phone calls and visits. While some women view such gestures as acts that will be abandoned once men "hit the streets," others see them as sincere efforts to change. The latter group of women tended to believe that their partners could be good husbands and/or fathers despite their criminal backgrounds. They recognized, however, that men returning home from prison need to transition into responsible family roles and that women may need to be explicit about their expectations and boundaries.

Simone: I was like, "Yes, you [referring to her boyfriend] can come live at home again and be with your daughter. This is a friendship, not a commitment. You're here, basically, for the sake of your daughter and to support me in taking care of her."

Destiny: [referring to a conversation with her husband] But you have to be patient. You want things back instantly, like we need a crib [home], we need a car. It's going to take time. I suggest that you do not do anything to get yourself back in [prison]. I'm not down with you no more on no criminal behavior...and so far, so good. And I pray on it every day.

Judy: We went through counseling with the kids...and so a lot of things this time we were aware of. We knew what we had to do to make this work.

The comments of women who wanted to maintain their relationships with incarcerated or released partners differed considerably from those of women who were no longer in relationships or were thinking of disrupting them. The latter group talked about abuse, burdens, hurt, and disappointment and saw their role primarily as providing economic comfort for husbands or boyfriends. Women who wanted to maintain their relationships, on the other hand, focused on men's positive changes and men's roles in the family. They also talked much more about nurturing roles, both in terms of what their partners provided for them and the encouragement and emotional support they provided for their men. Women who spoke of positive relationships with partners who had returned home from prison acknowledged their partners' good qualities as well as their faults.

Hope: I think he carries a lot of guilt because of his past. And you know, I think he really tries to prove to me that he's really a good man. He's really changed somewhat. But a lot of stuff is still there. And the more he sees it, the more guilt he develops. And what I try to do, I just deal with him with loving kindness. But, at the same time, I see it going on, I'm honest with him.

Judy: I used to watch him kick women in the face. And now he prides himself on not being that way. See, anybody can change.

CHILDREN AND THEIR FATHERS

The impact of incarceration and release on a prisoner's children was a recurring theme throughout the group discussions. Women saw fathers as essential figures in children's lives, and they wanted to maintain and protect father-child bonds. Taking children to visit an incarcerated father and accepting expensive collect phone calls from prison were two ways of doing that. Some women maintained communication with incarcerated men in whom they no longer had any romantic interest primarily because of their children. They felt the men had been good fathers when they were home or that children missed their fathers. Others simply wanted their children to know who their fathers were.

Most of the women wanted fathers to acknowledge their children, spend time with them, and buy things for them. They were not pleased when fathers failed to show concern for their children or ask about them.

Holly: My sons and my daughters are number two. He's always wanted to know about...me and him. Like you said, what about the kids? You know the kids is number two. It's like if we are not together, he doesn't want to know about the kids. That's the way they are, you know.

Moreover, some women expressed concern that fathers in prison were not around to care for and discipline their children. They believed that children take advantage of their mothers when fathers are absent.

Quincy: I'm going to say that mine is very difficult because he left me with four kids to raise by myself. Them children start giving me problems. I got to hold the family together. Meantime, I'm really, maybe I wasn't hating him that much, but now I'm really [hating him] because I'm by myself now. Now that he's away, he has a son in jail. If he was here, maybe he could have helped that son stay home, and he would be with me. I really despise [my husband], doing what he did, and I struggled to keep my family together and I still have one that's astray.

Women who had been physically abused by a partner who was later incarcerated often expressed relief that their children no longer had to witness the abuse. One woman saw a father's absence from home as positive. She reasoned that single parenting is better because parents often have different views about rearing children.

Preparing children for their father's return from prison did not appear to be a primary concern for most of the women. There were several reasons for this. Some women didn't know how to go about preparing their children.

Mary: I don't know how to prepare for my son's father coming home because he's threatening me by telling me what he's going to do to me when he comes home...He's a violent person.

Other women felt it wasn't possible to prepare children for their father's return. Moreover, some children—especially those who are very young—may not know or understand that their fathers are in prison; some families may have accepted the repeated incarceration of men as a fact of life; and some men may be serving short sentences. Most of the women who did intend to prepare their children for their father's return felt that the father should play a role—or even take the lead—in explaining why he had been away in prison.

A number of women with teenage sons or daughters indicated that their children wanted little to do with their incarcerated fathers. According to their mothers, these children may resent a father's attempts to exercise discipline and control; they may also be angry with their father for having been absent.

Holly: My daughter is very resentful, and she doesn't want to know about her father...I just can't seem to get her to want to know him, to want to know anything about him. I don't have anything to do with him anymore. He's just really destroyed my life.

Quincy: My children are much older now, and I don't think I got a way of preparing my children because of the age that they are now.

Dimples: My daughter tells me, "I don't need no father. What do I need a father for? I got you mommy. What do I need a father for at this age mommy? He wasn't there for me then. What do I need him now for?"

DEFINING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The women who participated in the discussion groups offered broad definitions of domestic violence that included physical, mental, and emotional abuse. In many cases, they illustrated these definitions by recounting painful episodes from their own lives—even though they were never asked about their own experience of domestic violence. They rarely mentioned physical abuse first but focused instead on verbal abuse: “the things the man says out of his mouth,” as one woman put it.

The women described a wide range of verbal abuse: a man telling his partner what she could or could not do; demanding that she do things for him; comparing her unfavorably with other women; calling her derogatory names; telling her that she is nothing and that no one wants her; and bragging about episodes of infidelity or children he fathered with other women. Verbal abuse can leave a powerful and lingering negative impact.

Holly: Domestic violence, besides somebody hitting you, a lot of times, people say things that could hurt you...somebody [might] hit you, and it would hurt for a little while. [But] it goes away...The verbal abuse, it stays with you, just haunts you. And no matter what you do, [you] just can't seem to get it out of your mind. It just stays there, every minute, every hour of the day. [You] can never get rid of it when they start with that verbal abuse. And men, they really know how to hang that on you.

Holly then went on to describe the physical abuse she had endured.

Holly: Domestic violence is when they hitting on you...my husband had beat me up so bad that I had to get two sets of sunglasses so nobody would see...and knock your teeth out of your mouth, being thrown down the stairs, you know. Now my legs are all messed up. They're still messed up. [Holly limps and walks with a cane.] So you know, [both verbal abuse and physical abuse] are bad. They both are bad.

The fact that few women focused on physical abuse in their definitions of domestic violence may be due to the even more extreme emotional abuse that some recounted.

Oprah: He kidnapped my daughter. He raped her. He beat her. He left her; he was trying to leave her for dead in the basement of an abandoned house.

Oprah went on to place this horrible crime in a larger emotional context.

Oprah: He knows that he won. And I think that was what he set out to do—to prove to me that no matter what I do or where I go that he always gonna have the last word...He knows what he did to me was unspeakable and he knows he won. He won the war you know. And he knows that he's affected me for the rest of my life.

Participants' definitions of domestic violence also included forced sex, harassment, stalking, threats, and intimidation. One woman described the dramatic loss of self-identity that can accompany domestic violence.

Woman: [T]he biggest [consequence of domestic violence] for me probably was loss of [my] self-identity...it was like my world revolved around him. My interests and what I thought and whatever didn't really matter. His ideas and interests mattered. Like doing things and going out to do stuff, I would pick his choices over my own choices.

Particularly painful were those acts of violence that either involved or were witnessed by children.

Woman: [Sometimes] they don't care about if you lose your kid or not...Like in my situation, I was pregnant, and he came and tried to suffocate me with the pillows and I couldn't breathe. And I tell you, that's what I call abuse.

Woman: I define [domestic violence] to be something that a woman will not want to ever experience. It's really hard on her, especially if she has kids...for your kids to witness something like that, you know....It's hard when you see your kids in a corner all balled up, scared, because their dad's beating up their mom.

Some women spoke of their efforts to fight back in the face of persistent physical abuse.

Miss Goldberg: I just one day just stood up. And I was like, I'm tired of this. I'm not just gonna let him put his hands on me no more. And we just got to tussling.

CORRECTIONS STAFF, FAMILY SUPPORT, AND WOMEN'S SAFETY

Prisoners' wives and girlfriends have little contact with corrections staff and generally do not list them among the resources they turn to for aid or support. Contact with prison staff is usually limited to formal, cursory exchanges with the guards who process visitors or work in the visiting areas. Contact with other staff, such as prison chaplains or counselors, is rare. Several women said it is difficult to obtain information from staff; in fact, many believe that staff are either not permitted or not willing to interact with family members.

Woman: You're not allowed [to obtain information from staff]. They not gonna tell you nothing about what's going on.

Consuela: You can't find out if they're really going to their program...You don't get to find out none of that [from staff].

Woman: [Staff are] only concerned with, concerned about him because he's the one that committed the crime.

Some women, especially those who have been incarcerated themselves, do not want to have any contact with prison staff. In many cases, these women believe that information shared with prison staff is not confidential and that it can and will be used against the prisoner and his family. One woman had concluded that discussing her boyfriend's abusive behavior with corrections staff could only have negative consequences. She believed that any information she shared would be traced back to her, especially if her boyfriend's release date was delayed or if he was required to participate in any additional programming.

The extent to which women are involved with a husband's or boyfriend's parole officer varies considerably; the degree of contact depends on the jurisdiction, the individual officer, and the nature of the husband's or boyfriend's crime. In some jurisdictions, women receive a written notice from parole that their partner is about to be released. Such notices don't always arrive before the man has returned home, however. In other jurisdictions, a parole officer visits the home to which a man plans to return prior to his release. Many women said that they believe such visits are intended solely to determine whether a home is suitable for the man leaving prison; few see the visit as possibly promoting family or women's safety issues.

Kathy: All they do is come in your house. Knock on your door and say, "Your John Doe is allowed to live here because he's coming out such and such date," and that's all they do.

Several women indicated that after a husband's or boyfriend's release, a parole officer would periodically visit him at home to check his compliance with parole requirements. They noted that such visits were frequently limited to cursory exchanges with the former prisoner or his wife or girlfriend; often, both parties try to make these visits as brief as possible.

Liz Taylor: [Y]ou have to deal with the parole coming and visiting the house...if they have a violent crime, they gonna constantly be on their behinds. The parole officers can be calling at any time, if they have curfews and things like that. So, you'll have to be there and you'll have to go through that.

Some women said that some parole officers, when visiting a former prisoner's home, offer advice to wives or girlfriends, give them a contact number to call, or provide concrete assistance.

Judy: The parole officer that my husband had actually helped me. My husband was on probation and I was helping him with his case, playing lawyer, and the P[arole] O[fficer] got the papers for me to take to court... And before [my husband] got out, [the officer] went to visit him and talked to him.

Women whose husbands or boyfriends had been convicted of life-threatening domestic violence crimes described having more extensive contact with parole officers and other corrections staff. Sometimes they received assistance in obtaining counseling, filing for divorce, and other matters. However, many of these women still do not feel safe.

Oprab: He could come back and stalk me...because he told me he was going to kill me. When he [raped] my daughter, he said, "I'm going to kill you, and then I'm gonna go out and find your mamma and kill her." ...He made a threat on my life. You know, and I feel as though he didn't get enough time.

The women's views about parole officers' involvement in family life stand in sharp contrast to their views about prison staff. By and large, women want parole officers to perform roles that extend beyond the surveillance and monitoring duties commonly associated with parole supervision. They think that parole officers should help their partners find employment and housing; require them to undergo counseling that reorients them to healthy community living; and keep women and their children safe from abuse and violence. They want parole officers to make regular visits and to speak not only with their partners, but also with them. And they want to be able to reach their partner's parole officer when they need to.

Consuela: I feel like parole officers, when [prisoners] are getting ready to get out, should either find them somewhere to go or move [them] to another town...move them to the country. ...I think that if they're getting out and they are going to a woman with a family, they should seek counseling. ...I think [the parole officer]



should check up on that woman and make sure she ain't being stabbed or being set on fire or getting smacked upside her head.

Sensitive: [The parole officer] should be there whenever we need him. When there is a problem between the spouses, you know, your relationship, I think he should bring the both of you together and talk.

Some women expect parole officers to keep their partners in line. These women may try to influence a partner's behavior by threatening to report him to his parole officer.

Whitney: I always find out my boyfriend's PO's number. Because if [be] act[s] like [be] want[s] to hit me: "What's that number?" You know. Because I will get it...[My boyfriend] will be at my house sometimes and [be] want[s] to act crazy, and I say, "Boy, I'll call this PO and tell him everything you are doing and where they can find you, where they can pick you up right now."

One participant even suggested that women might abuse this arrangement and recommended that police take care to establish the facts before proceeding against a man on parole.

Simone: I think that it needs to be thoroughly investigated to make sure that the truth is being told and that it is definitely a domestic violence situation. I think that it should [depend] on the severity.

Although most of the women generally value parole officers, the intrusive nature of parole supervision often tempers their appreciation. Moreover, because parole officers have the power to send one's partner back to prison, many women are selective about what they share with parole officers. Women's attitudes about parole officers may change from one situation to another. One participant recounted calling her brother's parole officer after he was verbally abusive to her. On another occasion, though, she fabricated an excuse for him after the parole officer arrived for a routine visit and found him absent.

Finally, some women, particularly those who have had negative experiences with the criminal justice system, do not see parole staff as a resource for themselves or for families. These women rarely want parole staff to play any part in their lives.

Oprah: Some POs, and this is just my experience, a lot of them are just there for the paycheck, you know. They are not doing their job correctly. Some of them will go tell the man what you said, and they will put your life in harm's way.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The discussion groups showed that many women view abuse by an intimate partner as a personal matter and attempt to handle it on their own. They feel ashamed or embarrassed by their predicament and are reluctant to let anyone know what they are going through. Many do not seek help unless the violence becomes life-threatening or they suffer serious physical harm.

Simone: When the physical abuse started in my relationship, I didn't turn to nobody. I was residing where I had support. My parents were there. My grandparents were there, aunts and uncles, friends that I went to high school with. But I didn't turn to nobody. I felt isolated, alone, embarrassed.

When they finally do seek help, many women turn first to their mothers, who may also be the first to sense that something is wrong. Opening up to one's mother is not an easy matter, however, for it may bring other family members, such as brothers, into the picture. While many of the women indicated that they appreciated their brothers' protection, they also feared that confrontational behavior would only lead to more trouble for their brothers and themselves.

In order to cope with domestic violence, many of the women said they turned to prayer. They prayed that abusive situations would end, that their partners would change or leave, that they wouldn't be seriously hurt or killed, and that they would be able to take care of their children. Some even prayed for harm to befall their abuser.

Gigi: As I am praying, I ask [God] to just take him out of my life for a few minutes or send him back to jail. That's what I ask.

Kathy: Sometimes, like in my anger, I'll pray for bad things to happen to him. Which is not good and I know that it's not good, but I am angry at the time.

Women who are actively involved in a church or other religious community may go to their pastors for help. They believe that if a pastor calls the police, help may come faster.

The police are rarely the first line of defense. Few of the women in the discussion groups reported calling the police for threats or for minor acts of violence such as slapping or pushing; in fact, some suggested that calling the police was a last resort.

Simone: And he just lost it, and I felt threatened and I had to call the police...because I'm to the point where now it's either going to be him or me. And then there is no self-defense laws in New York. So then, that's me serving 25 to life, and that's like, no I'm not doing that one today.

There are many reasons for this reluctance to call the police. Several women described encounters in which the police were disrespectful to them, gave little credence to their complaints, did not arrest an abusive partner, or arrived well after a violent partner had left the scene. Such experiences persuaded them that the police were unreliable.

Kathy: If I'm not able to defend myself...I make the initiative to call my family, you know, to get this person beat up. You know, I want him beat up now, see, because at one point in time the law had failed me. I got into an incident where they didn't declare the domestic violence. Like they declared it as an assault, and they didn't do nothing about it...I'm sick of the police failing me. I'm sick of the law failing me.

Women who fear that the police will mistreat their partner or send him to jail may also hesitate to call for help. They want the police to prevent a physical attack or stop one that is already in progress; they do not necessarily want their partner to go to jail or have his parole revoked.

Simone: Sending men to prison for domestic violence does not rehabilitate them. It makes them angrier and more violent because that's what's going on in the prison population—violence on top of violence. And so, when they come home they learn even more manipulative tactics to use on you. And they become even more violent.

Nonetheless, violence that is life-threatening or extreme often leads them to change their minds.



Many women expressed skepticism about the court's ability to help, too. Often a court will issue a restraining order that prohibits a man with a domestic violence conviction from contacting his former partner; a man who violates such a restraining order is subject to arrest. Several participants felt that restraining orders actually place a woman in greater jeopardy if the man doesn't care about being arrested.

Oprah: You can't turn to your mom, your sister, your girlfriend; they can't help you....In the long run, the law is the only one that's gonna put that real deal down on him, you know what I am saying....And then again, all the time, that don't work. You know, you've got some that will say, "you go get a restraining order." You know [an abusive partner] will just violate [restraining orders].

Some participants also noted that in stipulating which locations men are to avoid, restraining orders may reveal a woman's address.

Some women rely on themselves to handle potential and actual abuse. They carry weapons and let men know that they will not accept being beaten or threatened. One woman indicated that she and her brothers, "Smith and Wesson," [a reference to her gun] could take care of anything. Another stated that while she carried a pistol, a straight razor was her favorite weapon. These women expressed the view that it was better that they hurt their partners rather than their partners hurt them and that the most important thing that mattered was their own self protection. Some women used physical violence as a means of self-defense; others were aggressors who verbally abused and physically attacked their boyfriends and husbands. Sometimes their violent behavior led to their husbands or boyfriends getting restraining orders taken out against them; a few women also indicated that they had been incarcerated or arrested for violence against men. The experience of women who engage in violence against their partners is often complex.

Hope: After being abused, I mean, I was determined that no man would never abuse me no more. Because I was abused. I was tortured. Twenty years old. Tortured. And I became the abuser. You know, I had 12 assault charges before I was 24.

CROSSCUTTING THEMES

The participants in both the female and male discussion groups discussed male-female relationships, abuse and domestic violence, and sources of conflict. However, as noted earlier, the questions posed to each were not identical, and they often covered different aspects of these topics. In particular, women were asked about their children, informal and formal sources of social support, and interactions with criminal justice officials—questions not posed to the male discussion groups. Despite these differences, several themes emerged that were common to both groups.

Men and women talked about the difficulty of maintaining relationships, both during incarceration and after an incarcerated partner returns home. Both groups viewed infidelity as a major source of conflict—something that could, and often did, lead to violence. The men said they wanted and expected their girlfriends or wives to remain faithful to them; however, they often believed that their partners were not faithful and that they were probably lying if they claimed to be. The women's groups revealed that even the best relationships are extremely vulnerable during incarceration. Some women remain faithful to their imprisoned mates, but others decide to move on. Still others choose to preserve some kind of non-intimate relationship for the sake of the couple's children. Whether women chose to stay or leave, they viewed men's accusations of infidelity and men's involvement with other women as big problems.

The returning person's economic dependence on his partner, a stressor for both men and women, was also identified as a source of conflict. Men indicated that they felt frustrated about not having economic resources to contribute to the household. As a result, they perceive themselves as having limited power and lacking authority. While women understood that former prisoners have difficulty finding jobs, they still expected men to provide resources for maintaining the household; men who do not are seen as burdens. Women who had been responsible for themselves and their families also questioned returning men's attempts to establish themselves as family heads and sources of authority and control.

The central position of promises and dreams in communication between couples separated by incarceration was a theme reflected in men's and women's discussions alike. Both groups talked about incarcerated men's use of promises to keep women involved in relationships. Yet, while men may promise much, they often fail to deliver when they return home. Women want to believe men and sometimes do. But past experiences with unfulfilled promises leave them with many doubts. Men may be sincere in promising to do better, find a job, refrain from violence, and leave street life behind, but most have limited success in doing so.

Finally, while women and men both talked about intimate partner abuse and violence, they handled the discussions in very different ways. Women usually talked about their own experiences with domestic violence. They described abuse and violence that had been perpetrated against them, often presenting vivid details about specific instances. They also talked about acts of violence that they had perpetrated in self-defense. Men, in contrast, seldom referred to acts of violence they had committed against their partners. They talked instead about incidents they had observed or heard about secondhand. However, when asked directly about situations that could lead to violence, they did describe situations, such as a woman's infidelity or lying, that might lead them to commit violent acts.

POLICY AND PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

Prior personal experience with domestic violence was not a requirement for participating in these discussion groups. Yet intimate partner violence was an issue for many of the men and women alike, suggesting that the problem of family violence may be widespread during prisoner reentry and that those who advocate addressing domestic violence during this transition are well justified in doing so.

Currently, most collaboration between criminal justice practitioners and advocates for victims of domestic violence focuses on the front end of the system—developing responses such as specialized courts and

increased pretrial oversight of domestic violence abusers. Comparatively less effort is devoted to addressing domestic violence on the back end of the criminal justice process.

Anecdotal discussion with practitioners who address prisoner reentry indicates there is a widely held belief that stressors commonly associated with reentry, such as those arising from poverty, drug abuse, and poor education and health, may aggravate violent tendencies. Many who hold this view believe that addressing these stressors will resolve the issue of domestic violence. While the former assertion—that stressors associated with reentry can aggravate violence—seems to have been corroborated by the discussion groups, the latter—that addressing these stressors will in all cases eliminate domestic violence—has not. It stands to reason, therefore, that both considerations should be part of holistic efforts to address intimate partner violence during the reentry process.

Such holistic approaches should also be sensitive to the particular issues relevant to domestic violence in reentry that arose in these discussions, such as concerns about infidelity, frustrated role expectations, and co-parenting. Persuasive arguments can certainly be made for not undertaking co-parenting or reunification efforts when there is a history of domestic violence. Nevertheless, it is evident from these discussions that these considerations and choices are faced by victims in many cases. It is abundantly clear, therefore, that women need assistance to be empowered and better prepared for the release of an intimate partner, whether or not they intend to remain engaged in the relationship.

To ensure that such holistic approaches are relevant to the often unique experience of each returning individual and his intimate partners and family, practitioners should pay careful attention to the narratives of those they seek to help, whether victims or offenders. Given that issues pertaining to returning individuals and their families necessarily overlap, practitioners ought to become more familiar with the work of their complementary peers so that improved coordination might yield better results overall.

Recognizing that such efforts must be clearly planned and articulated (with accessible resources for faith- and community-based organizations, corrections and post-release personnel, and victim advocates), offered below is a series of recommendations for each stakeholder group and a discussion of the recommendations' policy implications.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIM ADVOCACY PROGRAMS

Several women in this study reported that they had been subject to specific threats and other forms of abuse and intimidation while a current or former intimate partner was in prison or after he had been released. Accusations of disloyalty or infidelity during their partner's period of incarceration, as well as tension over their partner's sense of entitlement and intention to assume control of the household upon reentering seemed to increase the potential for violence—in some cases leading victims to engage in violence as a form of self defense.

The phenomenon of women facing threats to their safety, as well as grave emotional, economic, and social challenges, is not new to battered women's organizations. Yet such organizations rarely focus their efforts on the circumstances of women who are in relationships with men in prison or on parole. This is due, in part, to the fact that while some research has focused on the intimate partners and families of incarcerated individuals, comparatively little is known about women whose life histories include intimate partner violence with men involved in criminal activity. Although a few studies of women who have been incarcerated for their use of violence have explored their prior histories of intimate partner abuse, studies focused on women in the community, such as those who participated in our discussion groups, need to be conducted.²⁹

Content based on information like that included in this report should be integrated into the service delivery approaches for African American battered women. Outreach programs and new collaborations must be forged, and focus and support groups must be developed specifically for these women. These efforts should be pursued and supported on the local, state, and national level.

Because several comments in our discussion groups indicated that it is not uncommon for women who are threatened by extreme violence to use violence as a defense strategy, support personnel must take steps to better understand victims who use violence and prioritize providing them with alternative strategies. Whenever possible and practical, initiatives to provide women with safe and viable alternatives to the use of violence should be conducted in cooperation with other stakeholders, including police.

BATTERER INTERVENTION AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The men in prison and on parole who participated in these discussions disclosed their perspectives about women with whom they were in relationships and the particular ways they viewed, controlled, dominated, intimidated, and abused them. The range of these perspectives should be integrated into batterer intervention program curricula targeting this particular population so that service providers are better prepared to respond to and directly confront these reentry-specific issues.



Protecting women's safety is, of course, an overriding priority; however, several women in our discussion groups also expressed the additional desire that offenders be rehabilitated. Effort should therefore be devoted to improving the effectiveness of and access to community-based batterer intervention programming.

For the same purpose, community-based batterer intervention programs must also develop stronger associations with prison and parole systems and services. If such systems are unfamiliar with batterer intervention programming, they must be educated to make such collaborations possible.

COMMUNITY-BASED AND FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS

Women whose husbands or boyfriends are leaving prison need help in preparing themselves and their children for their partner's return. Changes in family roles and routines; the influence of the prison environment on the returning partner; issues of fidelity, sexuality, and health; mutual as well as competing demands and expectations; the impact of the returning partner's economic and other dependence; and the discipline and care of children are all areas of concern.

Our participants indicated that some women would like services that focus on reunification or co-parenting; others would like assistance in planning for temporary or permanent separation. Both groups may require domestic violence interventions, such as assistance with obtaining a restraining order or developing safety plans. Individual counseling and support groups could help women whose partners are under correctional supervision address relationship problems and family challenges.

Domestic violence programs, women's social services, and family support programs provided by community institutions rarely offer services specifically designed to help couples affected by incarceration. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that our discussion groups showed that women whose partners were under correctional supervision seldom identified these programs as primary sources of support. Nevertheless, such programs are all potential resources for women whose intimate partners are incarcerated or on parole, and they should take steps to offer such assistance.

The fact that the women in our discussions identified faith-based organizations as among the first resources they consult in dealing with domestic violence suggests that faith-based organizations should also develop this capacity. Agencies with expertise in domestic violence prevention and reentry can play a role in helping them assume this responsibility.



PRISON-BASED PROGRAMS

Prisoners need preparation to reunite with their intimate partners and families in much the same way that they need preparation to adapt to a changing job market. Our findings suggest that several skills are particularly useful: handling conflict and change in a constructive manner; managing new family roles and responsibilities; and accessing community resources to solve personal and interpersonal problems. Pre-release programs could help individuals develop these skills by incorporating a standard component on preparing for family life. Given the high risk for domestic violence among those returning from prison, this component should emphasize domestic violence prevention.



Research suggests that a person's successful reintegration into family and community living often depends on relationships maintained during the period of incarceration. Several programs and services attempt to help prisoners sustain such ties while also promoting self-awareness and personal growth, believing this could prove beneficial for the prison population in general. However, those that provide such services need to include protocols to assess risk for or histories of domestic violence in order to prevent exposing victims to additional harm. Services that seem relevant to the participants in this study include parent education and training (including co-parenting and parenting from a distance), batterer intervention services, anger management classes, violence interruption workshops, and cognitive behavioral training.

PRISON COMMUNICATION POLICIES

Prison communication policies should support the maintenance of ties between prisoners and family members who wish to remain in contact with them, including children, intimate partners, and other kin. Inhospitable visiting environments, expensive collect telephone calls, and remote prison locations that make visits impractical or impossible are significant sources of tension and stress for couples separated by incarceration. When prisoners' ability to communicate with their intimate partners (and thus to work through relationship difficulties) is circumscribed, it can result in conflict and the permanent disruption of intimate ties, not only between men and women, but also between men and their children.

Policymakers and prison administrators should consider ways to make family contact during imprisonment less arduous, insofar as doing so does not compromise victim safety or the security of the institution. Among the measures that have been tried are lowering telephone rates and surcharges; setting up visitor centers and family advisory groups; instituting policies that assign prisoners to institutions closer to their homes; and holding family events with food, recreational activities, and children's programs.

PAROLE PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

Because community supervision is central to federally funded prisoner reentry initiatives, special attention must be paid to the effects of post-prison supervisory policies and practices on domestic violence issues. Parole assessments may need to become more sensitive to domestic violence issues, and, in certain cases, participation in a batterer intervention program might be included as a parole stipulation. In addition, parole officers' duties could be expanded to provide more support to the wives or girlfriends of former prisoners.

As the range of women’s views demonstrated, the nature of such work would vary according to whether a woman wanted to continue her relationship with the individual returning from prison; whether she felt safe; and whether the returning prisoner had a history of domestic violence. While parole officers would exercise professional judgment in responding to individual women, protocols based on best practices could guide their work.

Although some women who participated in this study were suspicious of parole officers, many saw post-release supervisory staff as help providers, and others expressed a desire for them to provide even more social services—restoring parole’s historic mission, which “mixed authority with help.”³⁰ At a minimum, parole should provide the households where parolees plan to reside with written information about parole requirements, what to expect from the parole officer, and what the parole officer expects of family members. More ambitious efforts would develop a victim-centered approach that would supplement supervision with support and services tailored to women’s individual needs. In order to provide more extensive services, such as employment assistance, referrals to domestic violence agencies, or couples counseling, parole officers would need additional training as well as organizational supports, such as manageable caseloads, referral networks, and access to community resources.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given the complexity of issues surrounding domestic violence among men returning home from prison and their partners, addressing this problem will require coordinated efforts by policymakers, program planners, women’s advocates, service providers, and the men and women directly affected by the problem. As this report illustrates, the circumstances of individual families vary widely. Efforts to ensure the safety of wives and girlfriends therefore need to be tailored to such circumstances in order to be most effective and to avoid unnecessary intrusion into family life. Curricula for battered women’s advocacy programs, batterer intervention programs, and other programs that address domestic violence should be enriched by including discussion about the challenges imposed due to incarceration and reentry. Further study should be conducted to capture the full range of experience.

Well-designed, conceptually sound demonstration projects that focus on domestic violence within the context of reentry represent an important means of advancing practice in this area. Such projects should address the known causes of domestic violence, and they should build on successful community collaboration models and effective service approaches. They should include the voices of victims and the intimate partners of those returning from prison in project design, have a firm grounding in both the practical realities of correctional supervision and the racial and cultural dimensions of service delivery and supervision, and maintain a commitment to the safety of women and children, as well as that of the public. Finally, these demonstration projects should be rigorously documented and assessed, and results and findings should be shared with correctional, consumer, and social service provider audiences on an ongoing basis.

While an individual’s release from prison can hold the promise of a fresh start, we have seen how, whatever their past troubles, some couples look forward to this occasion with hope, others with fear, and still others from every point in between. In nearly every case, the transition from prison to life in the community is fraught with challenges. Whatever their expectations, former prisoners and their partners may have little hope for a better future without the benefit of appropriate reentry policies and strategies. Creating these policies and strategies is the challenge faced by corrections officials, women’s safety and family advocates, and community leaders working to ensure successful reintegration in the community. ♦

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