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# THE IMPACT OF INCARCERATION ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS



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Although incarceration has a substantial impact on intimate relationships, little is known about how individuals cope with their separation and reunification. Incarceration also poses serious health risks for HIV infection, as rates are up to 6 times higher in the prison than the general population. A series of focus groups were conducted with individuals affected by incarceration to examine specific relationship challenges and factors that may place them at increased risk for HIV infection during and after their incarceration. Results highlight how institutional barriers and dependency lead to emotional withdrawal and disengagement from relationships. In addition, power differentials, avoidant communication strategies, and relationship instability were found to place these relationships at increased risk for HIV infection. Intervention recommendations for working with this population are discussed.

**Keywords:** incarceration; intimate relationships; HIV risk behaviors; qualitative research; coping

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Separation due to incarceration is a stressful experience for individuals in intimate relationships, and conflict within relationships is one of the most frequent problems faced by men released from prison (Zamble & Porporino, 1990; Zamble & Quinsey, 1997). Strong intimate relationships can provide emotional support, but the strain of incarceration often seriously damages or ends such relationships (Petersilia, 2003). As long periods of separation can contribute to marital instability and divorce (Rindfuss & Stephen, 1990), rebuilding relationships is a challenging process. Incarceration also poses serious risks for HIV infection, with rates in prison being 5 to 6 times higher than the national average (Lopez-Zetina, Kerndt, Ford, Woerhle, & Weber, 2001; Maruschak, 2001; Zack et al., 2001; Zwillich, 2002). Roughly one quarter of all HIV-positive individuals in the United States have been incarcerated at some point in time (Hammett, Harmon, & Rhodes, 2002; Spaulding et al., 2002). Many men acquire HIV while incarcerated due to sexual activity, tattooing, and/or drug use (Krebs & Simmons, 2002). With high rates of infection and recidivism, the “revolving door” problem within the criminal justice system poses a serious public health concern (Krebs &

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Simmons, 2002; Leh, 1999). More than half of men returning home from prison have an intimate partner (Grinstead, Zack, Faigeles, Grossman, & Blea, 1999), and many of them return to these relationships and communities without knowing their HIV status (Leh, 1999). Of major concern is that the majority of these men have unprotected sex within hours of release (Grinstead et al., 1999; Zack et al., 2001).

Although a number of studies have examined personal intraprisson coping strategies (e.g., Mohino, Kirchner, & Forns, 2004; Paulus & Dzindolet, 1993), little is known about how individuals cope with separation and reunion in relationships that have been affected by incarceration. Prisoners who maintain strong ties with their intimate partners and families have higher rates of success upon release (e.g., lower recidivism rates; Nelson, Deess, & Allen, 1999; Zamble & Quinsey, 1997). Many couples maintain fantasies of postrelease marital or relationship bliss, but the reality is often quite different (Carlson & Cervera, 1991; Comfort, Grinstead, McCartney, Bourgois, & Knight, 2005). Prisoners often lack sufficient coping skills to handle life problems that they face upon reentry, and small problems often escalate into major catastrophes (Zamble & Porporino, 1990, p. 58). For example, although many individuals released from prison report handling interpersonal conflicts by talking things over, they actually use threats and intimidation as communication strategies with very little analysis of the situation or weighing of alternatives. Zamble and Porporino (1990) stated that imprisonment leads to a "behavioral deep freeze," where poor coping strategies are stored away and reutilized after release because new strategies have not been learned. Meanwhile, partners of incarcerated individuals who are on their own in the outside world may continue to change and develop while their partners are in prison. Therefore, readjustment into a relationship is almost inevitably difficult for these couples, and this is particularly true for couples who struggled with conflicts prior to incarceration.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, with limited research on how relationships are maintained during incarceration (Comfort et al., 2005), we wanted to examine the specific relationship challenges faced by couples during and after incarceration. Second, because of elevated HIV risk within this population, we also wanted to identify relationship-specific factors that put couples at risk for infection. Most theoretical models have not effectively targeted or accurately identified relationship-specific psychosocial factors that predict HIV risk behaviors (Becker, 1996; Harman, 2005; Misovich, Fisher, & Fisher, 1997), so this study makes an important contribution to our understanding of the readjustment issues that put these individuals at increased risk for infection. To accomplish these two aims, focus groups were conducted with men who had been released from prison and women whose partners had been released from prison within the past 6 months.

## METHOD

This research was conducted as part of a larger project funded by the National Institute of Health, which was designed to test a relationship-oriented theoretical model of HIV risk behaviors for individuals in intimate relationships. Because so little is known about relationships that have been affected by incarceration, the first phase of the project utilized a focus group methodology. This method allowed us to learn directly from individuals who were coping with readjustment issues, in their own words. Theoretical and hypothetical propositions were thus derived inductively from, rather than imposed onto, the data (Kidder, 1981).

Twelve individuals (7 men and 5 women) were recruited from the New Haven, Connecticut, community with brochures and referrals from numerous community-based organizations and service providers, resulting in a total of five focus groups and one in-depth interview. Participants were required to be legal adults and to have been reunited with a partner after incarceration within the past 6 months. Men who had been released from prison were recruited because the overwhelming majority of the prison population in the United States is male and at high risk for HIV infection. Women whose partners had been incarcerated were recruited because the majority of new HIV cases in minority women are transmitted within heterosexual relationships, and many minority women have had a partner who has been incarcerated (Battle, Cummings, Barker, & Krasnovsky, 1995). The female participants had been separated from their partners between 3 and 12 months, whereas many of the male participants in the groups had been separated between 2 and 4 years. All participants had been involved in a heterosexual relationship with their intimate partner prior to and during the incarceration period, and the focus groups and interview were not conducted with individuals from the same relationship.

Recruiting participants from this population was difficult. Many responses were received through brochures and referrals from community service providers, but many potential participants failed to attend their scheduled groups, making the focus groups smaller than was intended. Although the focus groups were small, recruitment continued for groups rather than one-on-one interviews for two reasons. First, several individuals indicated that they would have been intimidated about participating in the study had the methodology been a private interview; we did not want the methodology to serve as a deterrent. A few participants even stated that they participated in the study because they wanted to talk with others who had also experienced separation from their intimate partner due to incarceration. Second, the group methodology allowed for dynamic interaction among participants and provided opportunities to build on each other's experiences through discussion. Indeed, larger numbers of topics and issues can be elicited through group discussion than through individual conversations (Berg, 1998), so this method of inquiry was retained.

Male focus groups (2 to 3 men in each group;  $n = 7$ ) were cofacilitated by the lead author, a European American female, and the second author, an African American male. The female groups (2 women in each group) and one in-depth interview ( $n = 5$ ) were cofacilitated by the lead author and the third author, a biracial female. At the time the focus groups were conducted, the facilitators were graduate students with advanced training in social, clinical, and developmental psychology. The groups were structured such that participants answered a series of open-ended questions developed by the authors about their separation and reunification with their partner after incarceration. Participants were encouraged to share not only their own feelings and experiences but also those of others.<sup>1</sup> Although true saturation (Bertaux, 1981) could not be reached due to the small sample size, much of the material obtained in the groups overlapped with material presented in previous groups, leading us to feel confident that the data we obtained were largely representative of this population.

Before audiotaping the groups and interview, the purpose of the research was described to the participants and consent was obtained. To maintain each participant's confidentiality, no demographic information was collected and only initials were used on transcripts to identify each speaker. The facilitators made estimates of each participant's age and racial group membership. More than 90% of the participants were Black or Hispanic ( $n = 11$ ), and

the participants' ages ranged from the mid-20s to mid-40s. Participants were given \$25 to \$30 and two bus tokens as an incentive for their participation in the study.

All focus group tapes were transcribed by the lead author and several undergraduate research assistants. Because categorizing tactics should be grounded in the data from which they emerge (e.g., Denzin, 1978), an open coding approach was used in the analyses (Strauss, 1987). Each author independently identified key concepts and themes that were common across the participants using framing approaches. First, three central themes were identified (with 100% agreement among coders), and then intense coding then occurred within these themes (Berg, 1998). Coders initially agreed upon 80% of categories within each theme. After organizing data using this method, an analytic induction strategy (Lindesmith, 1952) was used to identify evidence from the transcripts that might not support or fit into these thematic and categorical representations. Based on this content analysis strategy, illustrative quotes were identified for each category. Thematic categories were then refined and merged based on the content and overlap of the supporting quotes and final thematic structures were resolved through discussion between the authors until consensus was reached. By combining these approaches and integrating the results with existing theories and research, our approach allowed us to be systematic and honest with our results (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## RESULTS

Three central themes emerged from the focus groups: (a) how couples coped with separation, (b) the challenges couples faced when reunited, and (c) specific relationship dynamics that may put couples at risk for HIV infection. These three themes are thoroughly described below, along with selected quotes illustrating how the categories within each theme operated in participants' lives. To protect confidentiality, quotes start with the capital letter *M* to designate a male speaker and *F* to designate a female speaker. Whenever possible, we also provide supportive evidence from other research that has been conducted with similar populations impacted by incarceration.

### THEME 1: COPING WITH SEPARATION

Separation due to incarceration may be characterized as an ambiguous loss, where one's partner is physically absent but psychologically present (Arditti, 2003; Boss, 1999). However, the pain associated with incarceration also may lead many partners to become psychologically absent. Often, women are not given much sympathy or support for the loss of their partner due to the stigma of incarceration (Fishman, 1988a; Schoenbauer, 1986), and couples silently grieved their loss (Arditti, 2003) while working to maintain their relationship in its new form.

*Institutional barriers to relationship maintenance.* Intimacy is often seen as necessary for healthy relationship functioning (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), but incarceration limits the contact necessary to maintain such intimacy. There were significant barriers for contact and visits between partners. Visits were particularly difficult for women with children to arrange: Children needed to be on visitation lists to enter the prisons, mothers were not allowed to bring diapers or bottles, and obtaining child care was expensive. Several women in our study were not allowed to visit their partners or send money because of their own

felony records. Consistent with other research (e.g., Comfort et al., 2005), many women also felt uncomfortable during their visits because of the restrictions placed on their interactions by the correctional system administration.

Communication by telephone was very expensive, as only collect calls were allowed and often cost between \$1 and \$3 a minute (Petersilia, 2003). Some of the men expressed guilt about calling because of this added cost to their partners. In addition to time limits on phone calls (e.g., 15 minutes), men were often forced to choose between phone calls and other activities only allowed during free time, such as showering. Restrictions on interpersonal contact severely limited our participants' abilities to maintain their relationships, despite their desire to support each other during their separation.

*Provision of emotional support during incarceration.* The grief of losing contact with intimate partners and family members was intensified by feelings of isolation. Separation from relationships and family members often leads to complete severance of relationship ties (Hairston, 1998). Bowman and Forman (1997) have found that many African American men place high value on their provider roles within their families and exhibit considerable strain when faced with real or perceived shortcomings. Men acknowledged withdrawing emotionally as a means of coping.

*M:* Having a relationship from jail, I had to let go, I had to separate myself, you know? So my relationship with my wife, it wasn't a relationship. I just cut it off. She was mad, but she got to understand. I can't deal with it. Because I'm in here, I can't help you out there.

*M:* You know when you been trapped in there, in a place filled with hate, you know these days prisons are cold. You know, we got prisons turn people into [people] like my man . . . he says, "I don't feel nothin'." None. He don't feel nothing. You know, and some days now I wake up and don't feel nothin.' You know what I'm sayin'? Some days I don't feel nothing.

In addition to emotional withdrawal, men often coped by using cognitive strategies such as fantasy and distraction.

*M:* You tend to worry. What's she doing? Is she still yours? She's free to do what she's going to do, but you know, that goes along with trust issues there. . . . You got to take it off your mind, and tell yourself, you know, it's going to be alright. Think about how it's gonna be when you get out.

Men reported not being able to show signs of weakness while incarcerated, as labels of social satire and ostracism are often used to position men within the prison status hierarchy (Phillips, 2001). Labels such as "wimps" and "punks" are used to create and enforce this status hierarchy because male prisoners must consistently defend their status positions alone or seek protection from friends and groups within the system. McKay, Jaywardene, and Reddie (1979) have found that the deprivation of outside relationships results in high stress levels among male inmates, and many use avoidance strategies to cope with interpersonal problems (Mohino et al., 2004). Unfortunately, the strain and toll that these tactics take on relationships in the outside world are significant and difficult to repair. Women expressed concern and worry about the emotional toll this social change had on their partners.

*F:* It was hard . . . you can't see them or hear them. You worry. And it's like, with him, I know his temper. He's got a temper and anger problem . . . people like to pick on people and start trouble. And you know how things happen, people get killed in there.

Women with a history of trauma and victimization may be particularly susceptible to developing symptoms of depression and adopting avoidant coping styles (Recker-Rayburn et al., 2005). Moreover, the incarceration of the male partner has been found to increase role strain and the likelihood of dysfunctional parenting among newly single mothers (Taylor, Roberts, & Jacobson, 1997). Unfortunately, poor coping strategies utilized by couples during separation may lead to poor psychological and health outcomes (French, Rodgers, & Cobb, 1974), and partners in distressed relationships do not often have the support necessary to establish and maintain preventive health behaviors and life habits (Cohen & Williamson, 1991; Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). The emotional strain of having an incarcerated partner has also been found to prompt HIV risk-taking among women while their partners are imprisoned (Comfort, Grinstead, Faigeles, & Zack, 2000).

*"We" to "I."* The transition from being a couple to separate individuals was a very difficult process. The loss of instrumental support often served as a catalyst in this regard; the incarceration of a partner often forced women to become the sole economic contributor to their families (Hairston, 1998). Responses to loss of financial support had two distinct effects for the women in our sample. Some women appeared to gain a new sense of financial independence and reexamined the value of their partner, whereas others looked forward to regaining their partner's support upon his release. Many women, unfortunately, leave the paid workforce due to increased child care responsibilities after their partner's incarceration, which increases their reliance on public assistance and decreases independence (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003). Several women who struggled as sole providers while their partners were in prison resented losing access to child support.

*F:* First of all, he ate everything he wanted [in prison], I mean, he, you know, he had time to work out and stuff, and it's like, I'm stuck here with all the kids, I'm stuck in the house with the kids all day. It's like, I'm struggling for groceries, struggling for everything . . . they wouldn't give me any money for, for child support because he was in jail. . . . I was really angry at him because I had to go through all that . . . so when he came back and he was so rested, I'm like, when's the last time I went to sleep? Look at me!

*F:* When he got locked up, it was like I was on my own, I didn't know what to do or how to go about doing it. He always taught me never to ask, I couldn't ask him, couldn't ask nobody. . . . It was real rough on me.

Compounding matters were the financial needs of their incarcerated partners, for assisting partners with economic needs substantially increases role strain among low-income mothers (Morris & Levine-Coley, 2004).

*F:* It's a struggle trying to raise kids and you can't really afford long-distance calling or collect calls. You can't afford to send them commissary money, you know, it's hard up there, but I can't afford it. . . . They supposed to be the man and take care of the family. And they ain't doin' it. We takin' care of them. I ain't got no money to send nobody no commissary money. I ain't got it.

Women with child-rearing responsibilities disclosed overwhelming levels of distress due to the incarceration of their male partners. Loss of economic and child-rearing assistance and the burden of providing economic assistance to their incarcerated partner combined to increase strain. Moreover, some women were left to care not only for their own children but

also for the biological children of the incarcerated partner, which also increases role strain (Morris & Levine-Coley, 2004). Therefore, the loss of instrumental support from the male partner led to severe financial challenges, forcing women to become more independent and define their role as separate from their partner.

*Coping with sex and beliefs about infidelity.* Rarely did men or women discuss how they would cope with their sexual feelings while separated, and many assumed fidelity. Consistent with other studies (e.g., Comfort et al., 2005), women reported continued loyalty to their partners while they were imprisoned, even though they believed that their men would be unfaithful if the roles were reversed. Some women even suspected that their partners were writing and receiving money from other women while they were incarcerated.

*F:* I hear that he was getting mail from other females . . . cuz I didn't give him anything. Cuz I didn't have anything. . . . It's like, one time he sent me a letter answering questions that I never asked him. So he got me mixed up with someone else.

Many women stated that they did not have time or energy to think about sex or other men because of family support responsibilities. Decisions to remain faithful often depended on the length of time partners were to be separated. Despite expressions of loyalty, several women admitted to maintaining ties with alternative partners in case their current relationships failed.

Several men reported that they would not blame their partners for being unfaithful while they were separated and did not want to know about infidelity if it had occurred.

*M:* If she have sex for some money, I just didn't wanna find out about it . . . you gotta basically, like, pick apart the type of person you were when you were home . . . if you were unfaithful . . . you shouldn't expect her to be some angel.

Men also expressed extreme frustration in dealing with their sexual feelings, particularly if they had long sentences. Coping with sexual feelings was cited as one of the most difficult aspects of their incarceration.

*M:* I was actually starting to lose my senses mentally. Cause after a while, it's just like everything you see on TV, every magazine, it's crazy. Then like, after the first year or 2, I mean, it's constantly on your mind, but you realize . . . 4 years it's not gonna happen. So you kinda set a mind frame that, OK, I know what I did, I know this is my punishment, so just try to forget about it.

*Male control by proxy.* Women were afraid to socialize or seek support because they felt as if they were under constant surveillance from family, friends, and their communities. This surveillance enforced their male partner's control within their relationship, despite his absence. The fear that infidelity rumors would lead back to their partners seemed to be the strongest form of control in these relationships. Additionally, nonincarcerated friends of incarcerated men often attempted to seduce the women and would spread rumors if rebuffed.

*F:* I was having to struggle so much because I couldn't go to his family. Cause all of a sudden, "What's she doing with the money she gets? Is she buying something for her other man?" . . . They didn't understand [I'm] a single person not working, with kids.

Word of mouth from other prisoners and contact with people outside of prison served as the primary source of information about what was happening outside in the male participant's



communities. Women reported spending considerable time clarifying rumors that often caused irreparable damage to their relationships, particularly rumors concerning their fidelity.

*F:* It's really hard in there, because once certain guys start putting that into your head it's like, OK, even if you're talking to another male on the outside, they think that something is going to erupt from it.

In summary, male prisoners are not alone in their adjustment to prison life. With institutional barriers limiting contact, as well as a lack of instrumental and emotional support, both men and women were forced to redefine their relationships, and many opted to sever their relationship ties completely, if only temporarily. Couples who did maintain contact struggled with maintaining intimacy in the face of rumors and restricted communication.

## THEME 2: CHALLENGES TO REUNITING

Coping with the aftermath of physical separation can be extremely difficult (Helgeson, 1994). Upon release, incarcerated men are not able to exercise as much influence within their families as they did prior to incarceration, and they often experience tremendous guilt over the hardship their families experienced as a result of their imprisonment (King, 1993). These difficulties are often cited as reasons why many men withdraw from committed relationships and engage in risky health behaviors (Bowman, 1989; Cazenave, 1981; Zamble & Porporino, 1990).

*Starting over: "I" to "we" again.* Starting over was an awkward and challenging process for all of our participants. Relationship theorists have proposed that as individuals shift from "I" to "we," they internalize their social interactions with their partner, and then act in health-enhancing ways (DeVellis, Lewis, & Sterba, 2003), transforming their motivations from self-interest to "prorelationship" (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). Ultimately, most participants reported feeling like very different people after their separation; not only did they have to get to know each other all over again, but this transformation was a gradual process.

*M:* You can't just rush into no relationship. Because if you was with a woman for 8 years, and you been down 8, come on now, what time sense is that? I mean, she don't really know you no more.

*F:* Even though we have trust and loyalty there, it's, it's still a big gap . . . it's almost like a whole relationship all over again . . . the biggest thing right now is just getting back to reality, have everything set back in, trying to get back to who we were from before.

Three women noted that their partners were noticeably quiet upon their release and that it took months before they started "acting normal" again, and several men felt their partners did not understand how difficult the readjustment process was for them.

*M:* A lot of women don't understand that what we go through as men and being incarcerated. They say, "You ain't there no more now, you know? Just forget about it." It's not that easy.

Therefore, although many participants wanted to resume their relationship from where they "left off," they were also cognizant of the fact that their relationship would need to take on a new form; they were different people in need of getting to know each other all over again.

*Reestablishing trust and intimacy.* To reestablish trust, most men and women reported wanting to have an open, frank conversation about all that had occurred while they were separated. This strategy was also a mechanism to dispel rumors that had been spread about each other.

*M:* [I wanted] any dishonesty that was committed, you know, while I was away, told to me when I came home, so that would have made me be the person to want to sit and let me . . . judge [for] myself. Do I want to [continue] dealing with you?

There seemed to be varying degrees of disclosure about what actually occurred during their separation, with some participants admitting to telling their partners only what they wanted to hear. Attempts to have these conversations were not always effective, as some men wanted to forget about their prison time and focus on their future.

Due to fears of recidivism, reestablishing intimacy was difficult for our participants, and many women were afraid to become too intimate because they did not trust their partners to remain present in their lives.

*F:* He keeps going back [to prison]. Seems to like it in there. He's out on summer vacation now . . . [gets] locked right back up . . . it's weird having him around, cause, I don't know, it's like I know he's going to go back in . . . cause he'll stay out like a year or 2, get a job, then he goes right back in, it's crazy.

The time men spent with their partners upon release seemed to indicate their level of investment in the relationship and influenced feelings of trust. Zamble and Porporino (1990) have found that many men released from prison spend much of their time "hanging out" and socializing with their friends instead of spending time with their families or at work. This behavior was present in several relationships, leading women to feel frustrated about not knowing what their partners were doing when they were not at home.

*F:* When he's . . . just going in and out, you know, can't tell if he's lying or not. Then he'll say he's going one place and then he'll turn around and go out back other . . . he's somewhere else, I find he's doing something else.

*Role strain.* Men faced considerable difficulties in reestablishing partner, provider, and parental social roles. Several men stated that they did not feel comfortable entering back into their relationships until they were financially independent, which was especially problematic because many men do not qualify for welfare assistance, food stamps, or affordable housing due to their criminal record (Petersilia, 2003). Men also faced considerable difficulties obtaining legitimate employment because of their incarceration, which was amplified by the time needed to obtain identification such as a driver's license.

*M:* Have a plan to not live together right away. You know what I'm saying? Focus on getting yourself together . . . don't come empty-handed. Cause that's going to be a problem from the get-go, right there. . . . [You are] like a little kid in the house. . . . You don't really have too much say so when you ain't got no money. And you just listen up or get out. . . . But if you go to a shelter, you know, you don't have to hear nothing. Until you progress and get a job and all, and get an apartment or room, whatever you can afford.

Many men feared disappointing their partners, and their insecurities and anxieties were exacerbated as their partners put pressure on them to become financially stable. Oftentimes,

being reliant upon family or romantic partners for instrumental support was experienced as emasculating; men often minimized their emotional dependency and remained disengaged until they were able to support themselves.

*M:* It's also tough when you get . . . out, you know? You live with her or your family, and um, they got the upper hand cause it's their place. And it's almost like not being in control, but ah, you're walking on eggshells so to speak. . . . I prefer to sometimes be in the shelters, so it won't be so strained. That controlling atmosphere, you know, it's somewhat humiliating.

Several of the women felt like they were under pervasive surveillance by government officials and police (Websdale, 2001) and had to negotiate their intimate relationships very carefully. For example, even though many women wanted to assist their partner with housing upon their release, they risked losing their public assistance benefits if their partner lived with them. In addition, several women were concerned that their partners would gamble their money or even sell their food stamps for drug money.

*F:* When he came to the hospital [after our baby was born], he brought people . . . so they were giving, you know, me money and stuff like that. But they were handing it to him, and I'm like, "give it to me, don't give it to him." . . . And he's like, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna go over and get [my daughter] an outfit." . . . He never came back. He spent all that money.

Some research has suggested that women's financial independence affords greater power to leave their relationships, making the male partner more motivated to change (Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2002), and this appeared to be true among the women in this study; women lacking the financial ability to leave their relationships seemed to have less leverage to motivate their male partners to change, especially if their partners were already disengaged from their relationships.

Although not common, several men described their partners as possessing a high level of tolerance and understanding about their inability to provide instrumentally.

*M:* I don't have no money now; I didn't have no money when I was in jail. So she coulda been with any man. She didn't have to be here with me, am I right? A man with a job. Doin' better than me. I'm in jail. He doin' a whole lot better than me. So, he coulda been taking care of my bills and taking care of our own. But she wasn't. Cause he can't come over here take the place of what I'm doin.' Cause I show my wife love and caring . . . the little things I do for my wife touches her. You know? So I'm good.

In some cases, renewed responsibilities with the romantic partner led men to choose to live with his family of origin without his partner. By so doing, he was met with less provider role strain, but this decision was not always a comfortable option.

*M:* It's like you wear out your welcome [staying with family after release]. OK, you cannot see it, but you feel it. It's there. I mean, they not really mad and evil at you, [but] at the same time . . . they hold you down for a period of time. They don't expect this to go on and on. They end up telling you.

Just as unfulfilled provider role expectations created frustration and conflict, so too did unfulfilled fatherhood roles. Fulfillment of responsibilities to children was a powerful force in the relationship quality of our interviewees. Several women were afraid to have their

children spend time with their fathers because they continued to affiliate with a rough crowd and were worried their children would be hurt or killed while in their care. One woman reported that having her partner in the house was like having another child around and that she did not sleep well out of fear that he would engage in criminal activities that could cause the authorities to remove her children.

Most men in our study wanted to be expressively involved in their children's lives (i.e., play basketball or ride bikes together to reestablish their relationship bond); however, they were often uncomfortable doing so unless they could play a more instrumental role in their families (Bowman & Forman, 1997). Unfortunately, several men noted that their absence had eroded their credibility and ability to provide a consistent role model. In fact, one young boy in child care during one of the focus groups even referred to his father as a "business associate," as he had such limited contact with him.

*M:* All you can do is be a friend. It works in [prison] too, and he call you, my kids always call me daddy, so that's not even an issue. I'm talking about me being a father . . . so it's not like I jumped into it when I got home. It took time. And I was there, we there now. So you know, it's gonna take time to be a parent.

Power struggles within relationships were evident in how couples disciplined their children. Women often reported that their partners were more of a friend or big brother to their children than a parent and would allow them a larger parenting role if they would stay out of prison.

Despite wanting assistance, several women felt uncomfortable allowing their partner to be an active parent, and some of the men felt as if their partners undermined their attempts to discipline their children.

*M:* She doesn't want me to have say so as far as discipline. Discipline, not physically really, you know? . . . We argue about that. . . . I'm sitting back there, wanting to a put a stop to [the behavior], but I just leave. [She] thinks that I'm being too rough or too tough or whatever. To have that strong voice as far as parenting, [she can't] then turn around and contradict what I'm saying.

Many participants had children from previous relationships, and supporting them was an additional strain. Balancing work and parenting was particularly challenging, as many had to work overtime to fulfill their child support obligations. Men often stated that their partners were jealous of the attention and resources they gave to their children from other relationships, and there were trust issues surrounding whether the mothers of their children were really using their money to support the children.

*M:* When you give them enough money, they want more . . . it's supposed to be money for the kids but you know, who knows how much of it goes to the child? And how much of it goes in her pocket, you know?

*Power and violence.* The relationships described by our participants were characterized by struggles for power and control. Jealousy played a large role in regulating women's behaviors, with some women acknowledging that everything they did made their partners jealous, from staying in their nightgowns when they were at home ("Who are you waiting for?"), to not answering the phone on the first or second ring, or even taking too long to check the mail.

Men and women struggled with different sources of dependent feelings, which influenced the power each partner had within their relationships. As discussed earlier, men coped with financial dependence by disengaging from their relationships until they could be more financially secure. In contrast, women struggled with feelings of emotional dependency, with some women feeling their partners only gave them “enough” attention to keep them around or criticized them to make them feel bad. Although women vocalized disagreement with their partners’ attitude that they would never “make it” without them, they often held onto the idea that they would be happiest with men to provide for and protect them. One woman even stated that she would stay involved with her partner until he became “tired” of her. This sentiment illustrates the anxiety that many women felt about being alone.

*F:* I needed that man to be there while I’m in the [drug treatment] programs. . . . I needed that man to be there. . . . I didn’t want to sit at home. I needed that man to be there because all the women had men, and you didn’t wanna be by yourself. I needed that man for everything but the right thing. I needed that man to love me.

Although there did not appear to be an explicit link between emotional dependency and physical abuse, the threat of domestic violence appeared to be a factor in remaining in unequal and potentially harmful relationships. In fact, there were some women who believed the only way to get out of their relationships would be if their partner was killed or became incarcerated again.

*F:* He’s violent in his own way . . . if you leave them, you’re scared to walk the street when you find out they are getting out because you don’t know what kind of approach they gonna have. They beat us all the time.

*F:* I love him but it would probably be better for him and us if he just went away . . . it’d be better if he just got shot or locked up, got killed in jail so I don’t have to deal with him.

Communication strategies within these relationships appeared to be quite ineffective due to differences in power. Several participants felt they could not fully voice their concerns because their partners would not listen to them. Arguments were frequent, and avoidance was often used as a strategy to circumvent violence.

*F:* When you start arguing, I walk away. . . . I turn my back away from you until you calm down. Me, I can’t deal with it. With my situation, being pregnant, I can’t do it. . . . [I say] you’re stupid. “I’m stupid? Da da da!” Alright honey, I’m going to walk away until you calm down.

*M:* I would sit on the porch, I’d do anything. I’d watch TV. I just, I kinda just block her out. Which causes another argument, because women hate to be ignored.

Both men and women resorted to indirect forms of partner control or violence when communication attempts failed. For instance, several group members stated that when women could not influence their partner’s behaviors, they would threaten to tell their parole officer or halfway house counselor that they were using drugs, because allegations about illicit substance use would put their partner back in prison. Such indirect forms of partner control illustrate how women coped with low feelings of power within their relationships.

## THEME 3: RELATIONSHIP QUALITY, POWER DYNAMICS, AND HIV TRANSMISSION RISK

In addition to the challenges these couples faced in trying to reestablish their relationships, there were a number of other dynamics operating that may put these couples at risk for HIV infection.

*Mate availability.* Relationship satisfaction has been directly related to the perceived costs and benefits of the relationship, as well as the comparison level of alternative partners (Rusbult, 1980). The women in our study did not perceive many high-quality mate alternatives in their communities, which seemed to undermine the women's power in their relationships. Women saw postrelease men as a "hot commodity" with increased sex appeal.

*F:* When I see them for the first time, after he came out, whew, they look good when they come back. . . . I'm going to be honest with you, today, my man looked better than when he used to . . . guys, when they come out, they look totally different than what they used to look when they went in.

One man in the group stated that spending time with his partner seemed to increase her jealousy, as she was now able to witness how other women were attracted to him.

*M:* Right now in society there a, there is a demand for, you know, a shortage of good men. You know, cause a lot of men incarcerated. . . . I notice like a lot of women, when they see you . . . with a female companion, whatever, they choose to play on that and . . . go after that a lot more.

When asked about what advice they would give to other women who are expecting their partners to return from prison, several women said they would advise them to leave their relationships. However, women did not take their own advice, rationalizing their own loyal behavior with reference to the amount of time they had invested in the relationship, the fact that they had children with their partner, and self-attributed "stupidity." Because these women had invested so much into their relationships (e.g., time, children), they were willing to remain in those relationships despite evidence of infidelity and continued criminality that would put them at increased risk for HIV infection.

*Illicit substance use and continued criminality.* Drugs were a problem that pervaded most of the relationships, both because it was the reason that the majority of the men had been incarcerated and because drugs were often used by both partners. For many couples, both partners struggled with recovery from alcoholism, marijuana use, or cocaine use, and there seemed to be a pervasive fear that one partner would enable or drive the other to relapse when problems arose within the relationship. The extent to which the female partners were involved in drug use was unclear, but one woman reported losing her most significant relationship due to crack cocaine use and her relationships since then were with men who supported her drug habits.

Substance abuse had a devastating impact on risky sexual behaviors. Sex was often irresponsibly exchanged for drugs in some of these relationships, and it is likely that substance abuse or dependency exacerbates chronic financial and social support shortfalls. Altered states impaired judgment, and both women and men admitted to engaging in high risk sexual behaviors while they were under the influence.

*F:* My reaction to coke, crack cocaine is, I don't want to have [sex]. I don't want to have nobody talking to me, I don't want to be touching when I haven't been asked. You know, I'd be, I might even, I would say I would become violent; you know, start arguing, be violent and go get some more drugs . . . and then when I didn't have no more, I would have [unprotected] sex with them so he could buy me more.

Several men in this study returned to drug dealing and other criminal activities to meet lifestyle expectations and provide for self- and other-expected instrumental support. Women were very concerned about the possibility that their partners were engaging in criminal activity, particularly when they had children together.

Even though engaging in criminal activities such as selling drugs was one mechanism to obtain immediate financial support, it often increased the male partner's risk for recidivism and substance abuse relapse, which may ultimately place him at higher risk for HIV infection.

*Attitudes, beliefs, and communication about HIV/AIDS.* Participants perceived HIV to be a serious problem in their communities, most knew numerous people who had died of AIDS-related illnesses, and they all possessed a strong sense that their health status had effects on those around them.

*M:* It's a big issue because it affects our community. We have family, we have children, so it's definitely a big issue because we're surrounded by AIDS . . . every time you turn around . . . I had a family member pass away from HIV.

Swartz, Lurigio, and Weiner (2004) have found that although many prisoners know of at least one person who was HIV-positive, the overwhelming majority of their participants still engaged in risky sexual behaviors prior to incarceration. Prevalence rates of HIV infection did not seem to significantly increase many of our participants' perceived vulnerability.

Our male participants did not personally acknowledge risky sex with other men while in prison, which may be due to our focus group method of inquiry. However, consistent with reports of in-prison sexual behaviors during periods of low supervision (Seal et al., 2004), men reported that sex with female correctional officers and other men was common due to being deprived of other sexual outlets. Indeed, researchers have found that more than 23% of their inmate samples have engaged in some form of same-sex sexual behavior for pleasure, love, protection, and favors (Garland, Morgan, & Beer, 2005).

*F:* There's a lot of partners for the guys [in prison] . . . especially if they've been in there a long, long time. You know most of them will end up, um, masturbating themselves or going in the shower, because he's told me this before, you know with all the people that've done a long stretch in that, it's really hard on them . . . and they can't even have a Playboy book in their cell, nothing.

None of the women in our groups suspected that their recently released partner had intercourse with a man or engaged in other risk behaviors while incarcerated. Research has shown that women do not often perceive themselves to be at risk for HIV as a result of their partner's incarceration (Kim et al., 2002), and most of the women in our study did not believe themselves to be at risk. Women also did not have accurate beliefs about the relationship between HIV and incarceration. In fact, several women believed men were "cleaner" after incarceration because they had not been around other women and were off the streets. In addition, several women also falsely believed that HIV-positive men in the

Connecticut prison system are placed into separate units and that HIV testing was mandatory prior to release.

Sex was difficult for couples to discuss, with some men reporting that their partners were very shy about the topic. There seemed to be great variability in the extent to which couples talked about HIV risk, with some partners having long discussions about it after their release, and others not feeling the need to talk at all because they believed they were monogamous and not vulnerable to infection.

Therefore, despite the awareness of the HIV problem within their communities, many of our participants did not feel that HIV infection was a serious possibility in their relationships, and few discussed their current or prior risk behaviors with each other.

*HIV testing and inconsistent condom use.* Despite knowledge of how HIV is transmitted, many individuals released from prison still resist engaging in HIV preventive behaviors (Swartz et al., 2004). Half of the participants used counseling and testing as their only method of "protection" for HIV and other STDs, and they trusted their partners to be faithful. Testing for HIV was frequent; some participants reported being tested with their partner every 3 to 4 months, which seemed to provide a sense of security about their personal risk. Obtaining a negative test result was seen as proof of their partner's continued fidelity and allowed couples to avoid discussion about risk behaviors. With a few exceptions, many participants did not wait to get tested for STDs prior to reengaging in sexual intercourse with their partners.

Comfort and colleagues (2000) have found that trust in one's partner and low perceptions of HIV risk were cited as reasons to not use condoms, and condom use can conflict with the desire to maintain a committed relationship (Sherman & Latkin, 2001). Consistent with those results, condom use was infrequent among our participants.

*F:* He gets upset about rubbers. He does not want to put on a rubber. I usually [have sex without them]. He gets upset. Said he just sleeping with me and his wife. And I guess I was dumb about it. I even said, "Well who's your wife sleeping with?" You know? She waiting for him, and I'm waiting for him. It's just us three. . . . I want to be safe now, and you can't, men don't want to hear that.

Many women voiced concern that their partners did not feel vulnerable to HIV and never wanted to use condoms because they thought that a cure would be found soon.

*F:* I'm scared of him because of his mentality. He thinks you can cure any STD. I'm like, you can't cure herpes. Sorry, but you can't. Can't cure HIV. But he's like, "well, they're working on it. They'll have a cure" . . . so that's why, I'm so, you know belligerent with him because he thinks he's invincible.

*F:* He'll just wink at [other women] and they won't even care, they're just all over him. And he doesn't really care [about using condoms]. But you know, when he gets out [of prison], I'm like, "You got to get tests, got to get tested and everything." And he's like, "I know how to handle it." Like, like he can't catch anything. My mind is never settled about that because I know he's like a gigolo.

Some participants did report condom use when they suspected partner infidelity, but the effectiveness or follow-through of this demand may be limited by the willingness to avoid an argument or possible violence.



## DISCUSSION

Relationships have often been conceptualized as consisting of two people whose behaviors are interdependent, such that the behavior of one partner will produce change in another (e.g., Kelley et al., 1983). Unfortunately, incarceration posed serious relationship maintenance challenges for the participants in this study, as the physical separation and emotional aftermath made interdependency extremely difficult to reestablish upon their reunion. Both male and female partners struggled with maintaining bonds with one another during incarceration despite severe restrictions on their interpersonal contact and communication. Loss of instrumental support, fears about infidelity, and feelings of isolation characterized much of these relationships during this period, and emotional withdrawal was utilized extensively to cope.

After being reunited, participants had difficulties reestablishing trust and healthier communication strategies with their intimate partners. Many men struggled with feelings of emasculation when they were dependent upon their partners for support, often leading to further emotional withdrawal. Unfortunately, past research has demonstrated that deficits in coping with readjustment issues often make men increasingly pessimistic, dysphoric, and more likely to commit another criminal offense (Zamble & Quinsey, 1997). Female partners, on the other hand, seemed conflicted in their relationships. Although most expressed empathy about the challenges their partners faced upon release, they still expected their partner to assume the provider role and were frustrated about their partner's inability to invest in their relationships. Due to their renewed emotional dependency and perceived lack of quality mate alternatives, many of these women remained in relationships that they felt powerless to leave.

As mentioned at the start of this article, rates of HIV are considerably higher within the prison population than in the general population. Although there is evidence to suggest that infections occur both in the community prior to and during incarceration, it is unfortunately outside the scope of the current investigation to explore this direct link. Regardless of how and when HIV may be acquired, the challenges faced by these couples during and after incarceration may place them at considerable risk for infection. Competition for available mates placed many women at a power disadvantage within their relationships, and some women remained in relationships despite believing their partners to be unfaithful. Illegal substance use was also a problem within many of these relationships, pointing to an increased risk for recidivism and poor decision making. Although HIV was perceived to be a large problem within their communities, most of the participants did not feel personally vulnerable within their intimate relationships. In fact, many individuals discussed a shared sense of fate with their partner, such that if their partner became infected, they would share the infection together. Aside from infrequent condom use, HIV testing was primarily used within these relationships to verify that partners were being faithful with one another.

Therefore, although many men reenter their communities and relationships from prison with high hopes and optimism, they are often met with tremendous impediments inherent in the reacclimation process to civilian life. Faced with considerable anxiety about the uncertainties surrounding reintegration into their relationships (Paulus & Dzindolet, 1993), many individuals do not have effective coping skills to deal with this readjustment process (e.g., Zamble & Porporino, 1990) and are at increased risk for HIV infection and recidivism as a result.

### LIMITATIONS AND EXTENSIONS TO OTHER POPULATIONS

There are a number of limitations to this study. Because a focus group methodology was used, the results are largely descriptive, and there is an overreliance on self-reported attitudes and behaviors. Although the sample size was fairly small, this was a particularly difficult population to access, and the size is comparable to other qualitative work conducted with similar populations. Focus groups were conducted until much of the information shared within the groups did not add much to what had been obtained from previous groups. Although it is possible that more information might have been elicited had more groups been conducted and a different methodology had been used, this exploratory study in Connecticut yields results consistent with findings from other studies across the nation, such as California (Comfort et al., 2005), Chicago, (Hairston, 1998), and Vermont (Fishman, 1988a, 1988b). Another limitation may be that we relied on the retrospective memories of participants about their experiences prior to being reunited after the male partner's incarceration; this may have led to recall bias. To be eligible for this study, relationships in which the male partner had been released within 6 months were specifically recruited, so we are confident that the retrospective reporting was more accurate than a more delayed assessment.

Because the focus groups were conducted with heterosexual participants, it is unclear whether this sample's experiences reflect what bisexual, homosexual, or transgendered individuals in intimate relationships might face when reunited after incarceration. It is possible that the emotional coping and financial challenges faced by these couples may be similar; however, the power dynamics and specific HIV risk factors that characterized the heterosexual relationships in our study may not generalize to these individuals. In addition, relationships in which the female partner had been incarcerated were not investigated. Because the majority of inmates in the U.S. correctional system are male, the decision to focus on this population for this study was made. It is likely that the readjustment and risk dynamics may be very different in these other relationships.

There are many other populations that are affected by physical separation that may put relationship partners at increased risk for HIV infection. For example, research among military personnel has found that couples who have been reunited after military combat have unstable and low marital quality (Gimbel & Booth, 1994), and military personnel in the Angola armed forces (Ortiz et al., 2005) and Canadian forces (Whitehead & Carpenter, 1999) have been found to be at high risk for heterosexually transmitted HIV infection. In addition, migrant workers in Bangladesh (Shah, Kirstensen, & Khan, 2000) and South Africa (Campbell & Williams, 1999) also have elevated rates of HIV infections compared to the general population. Although these populations are distinctly different from the sample studied here, all cope with prolonged, restricted communication and contact due to physical distance. Future research should examine whether similar relationship dynamics and coping mechanisms are evident within these relationships and whether these dynamics place them at increased risk for HIV infection.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLIED INTERVENTIONS AND RESEARCH

Anticipating release from prison makes reunion with intimate partners and families more salient, and this may be an opportune time to intervene. Couples can learn more effective behavioral and cognitive coping strategies to face relationship difficulties, create a more stable support system, and reduce the likelihood of recidivism (Zamble & Porporino,

1990). The results of the focus groups in this study point to a few key areas where more applied intervention and research efforts should be targeted.

The physical separation of partners during incarceration has clear ramifications for readjustment and adaptive coping. Because barriers for contact resulted in emotional and cognitive withdrawal from their intimate partners, we first suggest that restrictions for visitation and communication should be lowered prior to the male partner's release. The inmate would then have the opportunity to become reacquainted with his partner and begin planning for a healthier and safer reintegration into the community.

At the time of this study, prisoners could not apply for welfare or social security benefits until they were released from prison, which made the transition into their communities very difficult. Men often resorted to selling drugs to obtain financial resources while looking for legitimate employment. Unfortunately, the appeal of fast money compels many individuals to continue selling drugs, as legitimate employment with a living wage is often difficult to obtain with a criminal record. Having to wait for identification such as a new social security card and driver's license also made cashing checks and obtaining employment difficult for these individuals immediately upon release. Therefore, providing a mechanism to allow prisoners the opportunity to apply for benefits and identification prior to release may help ease this transition and reduce the likelihood of recidivism.

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons and federal law (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2006), HIV counseling and testing is mandatory for sentenced inmates (6 months or longer) with HIV symptoms or risk factors. Unfortunately, many women in our study assumed that this policy then applies to all prisoners. Male participants who were not given a mandatory HIV test admitted to declining voluntary counseling and testing for fear of public disclosure of their sero-status. The state of Connecticut allows disclosure of the HIV status of inmates if the inmate's behavior poses a risk of transmission to another inmate or an intimate partner (Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, 2000), and men reported that being tested in their communities upon release allowed them more control over whom they decided to disclose their status to. Therefore, although HIV counseling and testing is extremely important for diagnosing and managing HIV among inmates, voluntary testing within the prisons is often perceived as undesirable due to fears of breaches in confidentiality. Health care providers within the prison system should recognize these fears as a significant barrier for testing among their patients and address this barrier as part of their counseling protocols.

Many of the participants in our study struggled with substance abuse issues. During their separation, few received support during their separation to establish healthier, drug-free lifestyle habits. Substance use is often a problem at preincarceration and postincarceration, as well as during incarceration (e.g., Seal et al., 2004), and many prisons offer no more than self-help drug treatment groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Bryan, Ruiz, and O'Neill (2003) have proposed that interventions conducted in correctional facilities should include risk-reduction components related to sexual and drug risk activity. Prerelease programs that incorporate substance abuse components (e.g., relapse prevention) should also address the relational nature of substance use, as many participants used drugs not only to cope with personal problems but also to enhance sexual performance and cope with relationship stressors. Substance abuse services should also be more readily accessible to the female partner, as many women continued to use drugs while their partners were incarcerated because they lacked support to cope with their absence.

Prerelease programs for inmates would be considerably more effective and reduce recidivism if they addressed relationship dynamics. Such programs should entail increased visitation and contact with intimate partners, preferably as part of a counseling-based intervention in which healthy interdependence could be facilitated and communication strategies, trust, and substance abuse issues could be addressed in a safe and constructive manner. Currently, many inmates are released into their communities with very little discharge planning and are in desperate need of linkages to agencies and providers that can support them in their transition (Carlson & Cervera, 1991). Because such systemic changes may be difficult to implement immediately, involving the intimate partner with the discharge planning process is a viable option. By reestablishing and strengthening their relationship bonds, inmates and their intimate partners could work as a "team," helping and supporting each other through the transition process rather than operating independently.

In conclusion, the focus group findings presented here lend support to recommendations by many researchers about providing mental health, substance abuse, and health rehabilitation programming within prisons. Prerelease programs within the criminal justice system should provide inmates with more opportunities to reconnect with their intimate partners and families (e.g., couples counseling), and provide more support for obtaining the resources necessary to obtain employment and benefits upon release. With only 10% of prisons offering comprehensive HIV/AIDS educational and prevention services nationwide (Hammett, 2000) and high numbers of HIV-infected inmates, it is also imperative that risk-reduction programming be sensitive to the relationships and contexts into which inmates are released. HIV interventions can be very cost-effective, with estimates indicating that every \$1 million dollars spent on prevention can save more than \$3 million in health care and related costs (Kahn, 1996). Institutional and community-based services should also provide support for the partners and families that are impacted by the male partner's return. Addressing relationship factors specific to the readjustment process may help couples and families cope with difficult changes and provide support for them in making healthy decisions.

### NOTE

1. Due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in this study, participants who felt uncomfortable revealing information about themselves within the group or interview format were encouraged to talk about experiences as if they had happened to someone else. In addition, to obtain information about a diversity of experiences, participants were encouraged to share information about others if they were relevant to the discussion. Although these statements may not be based on direct experience, the experiences that were shared within the groups often overlapped with experiences shared in other groups, or were evident in past research results, so their validity was deemed acceptable.

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