

CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITH WOMEN IN JAIL

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This narrative is about conducting research with women who are incarcerated at the county jail. The author discusses several aspects of the research process and how doing the research in jail influences the process and the researcher.

"I, too, have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable." These were the words I kept hearing in my head. I stood in the glass "air lock" waiting for the second steel door to slide open and allow me to continue my walk to my interview room at the jail. As a clinician, I liked to hear clients talk about getting comfortable with being uncomfortable; it signaled growth and change. Uncomfortable was a good thing in that situation. Now, as a researcher going into the jail to begin a study, the idea of ongoing discomfort wasn't so welcome. I wasn't sure how the jail setting or the staff would accommodate a research project, but I was going to find out.

The crack cocaine epidemic was the reason I found myself conducting research in the county jail. Crack cocaine had become the drug of choice for women of child-bearing age in the mid 1980's, and I found myself pulled into work with pregnant women and new mothers who needed drug treatment. The setting for that work had been familiar: the hospital's labor and delivery floor, or the home visit after the baby was born. As the crack cocaine epidemic grew and more babies were born prematurely and suffered grave consequences, the public began to take notice. Treatment resources for pregnant women increased, but so did criminal justice efforts to enforce drug laws. One result was that the prison population in the United States grew rapidly. One of the Corrections Officers or C.O.'s at the jail remarked, "We can solve the drug problem—just lock up all the users."

I was not sure if she believed that statement or not. I was clear that incarceration for non-violent drug abusing women hadn't shown any promise as good public policy.

Even though women are still a small minority of the overall incarcerated population in the U.S., their rate of incarceration has increased dramatically. A disproportionate number are African-American, Latina, and other racial/ethnic minority. Over half of them are incarcerated for non-violent drug offenses and approximately three-quarters of incarcerated women are mothers of minor children. Compared to the demographic characteristics of women in drug treatment, the characteristics of women in prison are similar. One thing most incarcerated women have in common is poverty (Chesney-Lind, 2002; Petersilia, 2003; U.S. Department of Justice, 2004). Given the opportunity, I thought it would be important to study treatment needs and barriers to services among a sample of women in the jail. Not everyone agreed. One of my friends, a long time volunteer at the jail, remarked, "You need a study to know these women are depressed and need help?"

I had long thought the jail provided opportunities to initiate services and to develop strong linkages with community agencies and professionals. The jail is local, so detainees aren't far from home, and family and service plans could incorporate or strengthen existing support networks. A jail stay can provide the time and space for assessment and treatment

planning for women who otherwise might not come to an agency for help. The jail setting wasn't foreign to me. I had facilitated a weekly therapeutic support group as a volunteer and found the work in jail to be interesting and fulfilling. Group work in the community competes with clients' demands and pleasures of daily life. Group time in jail presents a welcome diversion and a structure for the day. I had been gratified by the number of women who faithfully attended group sessions. Women in jail had the benefits of regular meals and a controlled environment in which to get through the early days of sobriety. Many of the women I saw were in better physical and mental shape than they had been in several months or even years. In group I would hear, "I can see my priorities more clearly when I am in jail," or "There aren't as many distractions here." One woman remarked, "Jail has been my window to let me see my life as it was and how it could be." There was a waiting list for the group; most women were eager to participate and were ready to work when they were asked to join the group. "Jail is a group worker's dream setting," I would tell my colleagues when I returned after a morning at the corrections center. When the opportunity to do research in jail presented itself, I welcomed the chance, but I was uneasy about increasing the time I spent at the jail. The jail was fine in small, group session doses, but I questioned my stamina to spend long days interviewing there.

For a number of years, my focus had been on barriers to substance-abuse treatment for women but not in criminal justice populations. I found my research muse in a drawing done by a woman who introduced herself in group by showing a picture. She had drawn herself running from drugs and the police, saying, "I'm running for my life and sanity." She clearly drew what she was running from, but she was running toward a large blank space on the paper. She had no idea what she was seeking to replace the life she was fleeing. With her in

mind, I designed the study to examine women's ideas of what would help them to access and use services after they were released from jail.



Research Setting

The study setting was an urban, full-service jail with a rated capacity of about 1,700. The daily count, however, could be as high as 2,000. The jail can exceed its rated capacity up to 125% and still be within the regulations, but on the days of overcrowding everyone, both inmates and corrections staff, were tense. There are ten classifications, from pre-trial detainees to sentenced misdemeanants. About 12% of the inmates in the jail are female and they are housed on two floors. Each floor has three pods of women and each pod has a control office where one of the officers sits to operate the doors and the elevators. Unlike most prisons, jails rarely have any outside space for inmates; there is not an exercise yard or any outside walkways to courtrooms or other buildings. In the small talk before the interview begins, the most commonly asked questions are about the weather: "What's the weather like outside?" "How does the air smell today?" "Is the sun shining?" I began to make some mental notes about the seasons or the weather so I would have more than a stock answer on the subject of weather. There is scant natural lighting in the jail. No matter what time of day or season, the lighting is the same. Temperature, however, does vary. On some

days, the jail is quite cold. On others, the heat is stifling and on others, the temperature is comfortable. Try as I may, I could not determine a pattern or a reason for the temperature fluctuations.

As a researcher, I was in the jail for longer stretches of time than I was as a volunteer. In some ways I tried to fit in. I tried hard to make eye contact with each officer I met. I waved to and thanked the C.O. in the control booth, no matter how long I had to wait. I laughed at jokes – all jokes - even the ones I would have found offensive on the outside.

Some of the C.O.'s were interested in my work and took time to talk with me. Some asked me advice about specific problems. Others were tougher and acted as if they felt I was one more nuisance to deal with on the shift.

I was careful to adhere to jail regulations. Jewelry was out except for hoop earrings with easy release backings. Scarves, belts, pins were all absent from my jail day wardrobe. Many everyday items are contraband at the jail. Some of them, like nail files and scissors, are obvious. Others, like pens, paper clips, keys, candy, and money, must be pitched out of pockets, purses, and briefcase. Often I passed the second checkpoint before I realized I had some forbidden object in my pocket and hurried back to the lockers to get rid of it. I didn't want a C.O. to think I didn't know the ropes. Security is the jail's primary product and I wanted to show I respected that, even if I might not agree with all the ways that product was delivered.

Women jail detainees wear loose-fitting, dark blue tops and pants. One of the former group members remarked on the uniform: "When I stop taking care of myself and slide back into trouble, I see myself in blue again." I never wore denim or dark blue on jail days. I also avoided any shirt and slacks combination that resembled the C.O. uniform. It seemed silly, but I could not bring myself to break my personal dress code. I was not sure

why. There was little chance I would be mistaken as an inmate and even less so for a corrections officer. I wanted to fit in so things went smoothly for me, but I also wanted to be separate, to be clear I was not part of the correctional system.

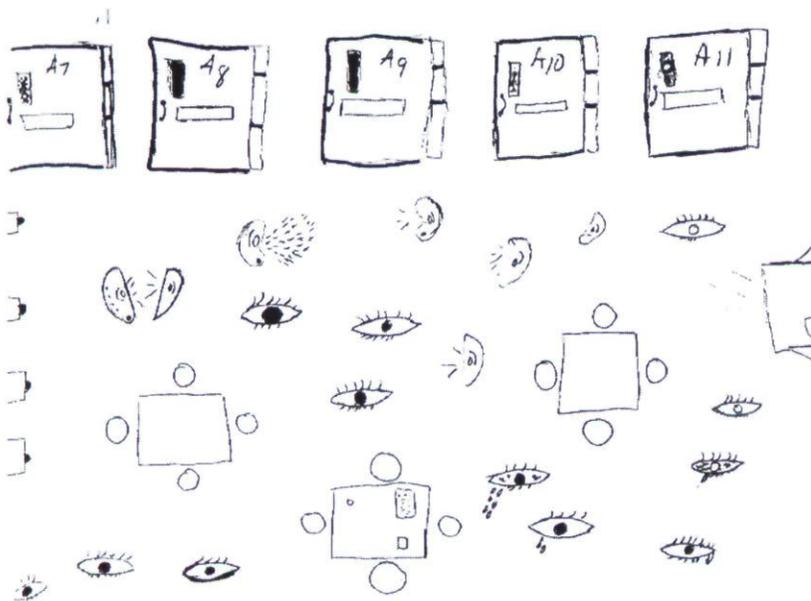
Access and Recruitment

Researchers often have had difficulty in gaining access to jail and prison populations. Because of my years of volunteer work in the jail, I had an insider's view of the schedule, the layout, and the general operating procedures when I designed my study. At first I was concerned about recruiting enough women into the sample. That worry was needless. Even though women in jail have attorney visits, family visits, pre-trial assessments visits, and court appearances, they have a lot of free time. The opportunity to talk about themselves and their ideas seemed to provide an appealing diversion for most, if not all women. My sampling process involved sending a brief description of the study procedures into each pod and asking interested women to sign and return the slip. Purposefully, I did not mention there was a \$20 stipend for research participants. Each day the study staff culled the duplicates and randomly selected names from the piles. After the first couple of interviews, the word about the \$20.00 traveled fast. All of the project staff became very popular. When study staff walked onto the floor, women waved and called out "I will be in your study, call me. I can be interviewed today." While this groundswell of support for the research process was helpful in meeting our sample goal of 200, I grew uncomfortable thinking about the reasons women were so eager to volunteer. I knew part of their enthusiasm was related to the boredom of jail and the need for the \$20. But I also knew from my clinical work how desperate some women were to tell their life stories and to get help for their problems. I was satisfied the study

would help to develop additional services for women in jail at some point. But participation in the study would do nothing to help these particular women when they needed help; they needed help right now.

Confidentiality

Jails offer little opportunity for confidentiality. There are eyes and ears everywhere and no place is out of sight. An example of art work from one of the therapeutic groups illustrates this point.



The interview room I used was small, but adequate for our needs. There was an outlet for the computer, a good light source, and a door I could close for confidentiality. Like all other spots in the jail, this space could be seen by anyone who walked by into the pods and by the officer in the booth. For security reasons, visibility is a good thing, even though I never have felt threatened by any woman I have met in jail. For the research interview, however, this visibility created some problems. If a woman agreed to participate in the study, everyone knew. For that reason I was careful what I called the study and how I talked about eligibility criteria. By naming

the project The Barriers to Services Study, I felt a woman would not be vulnerable or stigmatized if she were seen talking to one of the interviewers.

I had wrestled with the problems of confidentiality in jail as a clinician and had some success. Each group developed its own confidentiality guidelines and I had negotiated with the staff to run groups without having a corrections officer present. The confidentiality issues were different in the research setting. Women had to understand that participation in the research interview could not hurt them or, more importantly, could not help them. During the consent process women often asked, "Can you tell the judge about my problems and how I have been trying to get into treatment?" "Can you give a copy of this interview to my lawyer?" The university's IRB was clear that the information we collected had to be confidential. If women thought that participation in our study might result in a more favorable judicial ruling, they might feel coerced to participate. Also, it was not clear in every case how the information might be used by the court. Could the information from the study interviews be more useful to the defense or the prosecution? Given our confidentiality rules, few women refused to participate. In fact, only 2 of the 214 women we approached said no and both did so because they had just been released and were going home.

The other problem with such a visible interview space was the opportunity for distractions, and there were plenty of them. Groups of women filed in and out of the pods to go to medical, to court, or for visitation. These sojourns provided opportunities to see and wave to friends from other pods. There were visits from wardens, visitors, volunteers, medical staff, and lawyers. Each time the elevator door opened, there was another opportunity for distraction from the research interview and the need to refocus on the questions and purposes.

Interviewing and Responding to Needs

The research interview was long and contained sensitive questions about substance use, trauma, and abuse. Some of the information was entered into the computer and the rest used a paper and pencil format. Usually I could complete all of the questions in about 90 minutes, but some of the more complicated interviews stretched into two-and-a-half hours. It often was a painful conversation. Even though I had heard many traumatic stories in my clinical work, I found the research interviews to be distressing in a particular way. Many of the women's life stories painted a picture more consistent with victimization than offender. I found myself looking for even the smallest gesture—offering the better chair, making sure the pencils were sharp, allowing participants to use a pen during the interview—just to try to even the lopsided balance of the research relationship. I have developed a deep gratitude toward the women who have offered to tell their stories, to reveal a painful and traumatic past, in order to help me understand the barriers they face in seeking help

The research interviews covered many of the same issues I touched on as a clinician, but the research interview did not end in a treatment plan or a referral for services. It ended with, "Thank you for your help with the project" and a commissary receipt. The research interview didn't provide an opportunity to reframe and discuss a comment, such as, "I don't want services because I am afraid someone will tell me I have a problem. I just want to be normal and try to hide my problems." There wasn't a place in the research interview to counter a comment, such as, "God put weed on this earth and I'm gonna smoke it no matter what." I ended each interview with the question, "Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences?" Sometimes women would ask for suggestions about where to look for help, or would ask specific questions

about treatment programs, but usually they just wished me good luck with the study and returned to the pod.

Most of the women were younger than I, but a few were older and have spent the better part of their adult life behind bars. We had some things in common, such as gender and family roles – all were daughters, some were also mothers. Many of their stories were not remarkable, except for the extent of their bad luck of having parents in poverty, few caring adults in their childhood, and easy access to alcohol and drugs early in life. Most women shared their hopes for their children to be successful and the worries about their families. They talked about wanting to find things most women look for in life: meaningful work, loving relationships, and a peaceful existence. Many of them talked about their religious beliefs and how they wanted to have a second chance. Despite a wide gap in education and experience between us, I found I had more in common with these women than I might have expected. However, at the end of the interview, my research participant went back into the jail pod and I to my middle-class life. Many days I left the jail feeling life was profoundly unfair.

Conclusion

The findings of the study to date point to a need as well as an opportunity for a variety of in-jail and re-entry services for women with substance abuse and mental health concerns. I am pleased with the progress and with the fact that there have been many opportunities for me to communicate our results to a broad audience. I have hope that, in some small way, the study will help to improve the lives of women like those who volunteered to talk with us. Have I become comfortable with feeling uncomfortable? Certainly I have found a level of comfort in conducting research in the jail setting and look forward to the next study. It is a worthy and rewarding line of research and advocacy. That nagging feeling

of discomfort still exists, though, when I think about the way society has used incarceration to deal with drug problems of the poor. As a result of the research in the jail, I am increasingly aware of the segregation of opportunities for formerly incarcerated women. So many service gaps exist in all arenas. Poverty and its ills loom large and complicate the stigma of drug abuse and a criminal record. I now often reflect upon some of the narratives from the jail study and think, "A middle class person wouldn't have landed in jail." The protection of education, employment, and social support are sorely missing in most of these stories. I wonder why society cannot move away from mandatory minimum sentences and toward mandatory maximum treatment for drug abusers.

Ex-offender women trying to rebuild their lives and the lives of their children have lots of reasons to feel uncomfortable. Almost all of them are struggling with the cravings and pressures common to alcohol and drug recovery. They have problems finding a place to live, a place to work, and a place to fit into a society that doesn't have much sympathy or use for them. The words I hear in my head are different now: "I have to get comfortable as an advocate so I can make others uncomfortable about problems of incarceration and re-entry – so that changes will occur."

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