

Final Report

Project Title: Exploring the Impact of Prison Unit Social Integration on the Mental Health of Female Inmates: The Mediating Roles of Prison Victimization and Peer Relationships

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Project Progress

This project has made significant progress in advancing research on social integration in correctional settings. Initially, the study focused on maternal and infant health disparities in multigenerational households. However, after participating in specialized research training programs and identifying available data, I shifted my focus to the impact of prison unit social integration on the mental health of female inmates. This revised direction highlights the mediating roles of prison victimization and peer relationships, offering a deeper understanding of the social dynamics influencing incarcerated women's mental well-being.

A major milestone was my selection for the NSF Excellence in Research (HBCU-EiR) Fellowship at Prairie View A&M University. This weeklong fellowship helped me refine my research focus and develop a more sophisticated methodological framework. While on the campus, I engaged with scholars, explored advanced analytical techniques, and identified secondary data sources for this project.

Following this, I attended a week-long training at the University of Michigan, strengthening my skills in quantitative data analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM), and mediation analysis techniques. These methodological advancements ensured that the study would be rigorous and reproducible.

Building on these experiences, I refined my research question to examine the relationship between prison unit social integration and the mental health of female inmates, with a particular focus on prison victimization and peer relationships as mediators.

At the end of summer, I submitted all required documentation to Lincoln University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received approval in October. With IRB approval secured, I moved forward with gaining access to the restricted data on incarcerated women.

Revised Research Focus

The study, now titled "Exploring the Impact of Prison Unit Social Integration on the Mental Health of Female Inmates: The Mediating Roles of Prison Victimization and Peer Relationships," addresses the following key research questions:

1. How does prison unit social integration impact the mental health of female inmates?
2. How do prison victimization and peer relationships mediate this relationship?

The research is guided by three core hypotheses:

- H1: Higher levels of unit social integration are associated with better mental health outcomes among female inmates.
- H2: Positive peer relationships mediate the relationship between social integration and mental health.
- H3: Prison victimization negatively mediates the relationship between social integration and mental health.

A comprehensive literature review was conducted over the summer to establish a conceptual framework for the study. Key findings include:

- Social Integration and Mental Health: Haney (2016) found that supportive relationships within prison units mitigate depression, anxiety, and PTSD.
- Prison Victimization: DeHart (2008) and Severson et al. (2005) found that victimization exacerbates stress and mental health issues among incarcerated women.
- Peer Relationships: Kreager et al. (2016) demonstrated that positive peer relationships provide emotional and practical support, improving mental health outcomes.

I selected the Women's Prison Inmate Networks Study (WO-PINS) dataset for the analysis. This dataset, collected through surveys administered to female inmates, captures detailed information on their social interactions, mental health status, and experiences of victimization. Key variables identified for this study include:

- Independent Variable: Unit social integration (measured through self-reported levels of social support and interaction within the prison unit).

- **Dependent Variable:** Mental health outcomes (assessed using a validated depression scale).
- **Mediators:** Prison victimization (self-reported experiences of physical, emotional, or sexual victimization) and peer relationships (measured through self-reported quality and frequency of positive interactions).
- **Control Variables:** Age, race, education level, length of incarceration, and type of facility (e.g., minimum vs. maximum security).

The proposed statistical analysis includes multiple regression and SEM modeling, with mediation analysis techniques such as bootstrapping and Sobel tests. This study differentiates itself from prior research by examining broad mental health outcomes and the mediating effects of victimization and peer relationships.

The original goal for this phase of the project was to identify a secondary data source and gain a comprehensive understanding of the dataset. This has been successfully achieved through the selection of the WO-PINS dataset and a thorough review of its structure, variables, and collection methods.

Challenges and Next Steps

A major challenge has been the delay in securing data access due to unforeseen additional security requirements imposed by the data repository. I am currently collaborating with Dr. Fenner to address these requirements. Once access is granted, I will proceed with data cleaning and analysis.