

Acute perception of danger during incarceration among individuals who have been formerly incarcerated

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While research on past traumata among formerly incarcerated individuals is plentiful, there is limited research examining whether incarceration itself is a trauma. Using the Brief Trauma Questionnaire (BTQ; Schnurr et al., 1996) and an additional question, we examined whether the experience of incarceration was similar to established traumatic experiences in the level of perceived threat.

ABSTRACT

The prison system in the United States is known to be among the most predominant providers of mental health services (Roth, 2018; Semenza & Grosholz, 2019; Gonzalez & Connell, 2014); yet despite recent increases in strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches to mental health, these lines of inquiry have yet to permeate the arena of correctional care. We surveyed 552 individuals within an adult, community-based US sample, asking both about resilience and trauma history, with a question added to the Brief Trauma Questionnaire (BTQ) asking about incarceration. 453 individuals answered the question, with 8.61% (n=39) endorsing having been incarcerated. Frequency and percentage analyses were used to determine the frequency at which these individuals endorsed questions which would reflect criterion A of DSM-5-TR for posttraumatic stress disorder diagnosis while incarcerated (i.e., “Did you think your life was in danger or you would be seriously injured?”, “Were you injured?”). Of those who endorsed a history of incarceration and responded to the follow up questions (n=39), 74.4% endorsed meeting criterion A. Comparative analysis of endorsement of criterion A across all participants and categories of traumatic experience revealed incarceration was among the highest frequencies of endorsement. While the elevated prevalence of prior trauma for people who are incarcerated has been established (Jäggi et al., 2016), the rate of participants who endorsed criterion A for PTSD while incarcerated is concerning high.

INTRODUCTION

- Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been associated with higher arrest frequencies and increased persistence of offending (Levenson & Socia, 2015)
- Among 598 incarcerated individuals, “nearly or over half” experienced at least one ACE prior to age 18 (Messina & Burdon, 2018, as cited in Messina & Schepps, 2021), and the presence of traumata has been estimated to be as high as 90% in some studies (e.g., Miller & Najavits, 2012)
- The type of traumatic experience differs between men and women. Among incarcerated women, the most commonly experienced trauma is sexual violence. Among incarcerated men, the most commonly reported trauma is witnessing another individual being killed or seriously injured (Miller & Najavits, 2012).
- Trauma has been associated with multiple negative outcomes, including higher rates of perpetration of violence (Miller & Najavits, 2012) and increased scores on measures of aggression (Cima et al., 2008)
- Incarceration is associated with significantly increased rates of sexual victimization (Wolff et al., 2010), especially for those with mental illness.
- Historical traumatic experiences are often not discussed during individuals’ incarceration. However, as this literature suggests, there is a high potential that incarceration could frequently trigger the trauma histories of individuals (e.g., Messina & Schepps, 2021)

- Research Question:** Will individuals endorse experiencing elements of Criterion A for PTSD (i.e., fear of death or serious injury, or being injured) during incarceration? How will the frequency of perceived danger compare to other traumas?

METHOD

Participants:

- Adult US community sample
- 552 total responses, 94 excluded due to missing data, resulting in 458 usable responses
- Age:** range 18-76, mean= 31 (SD=10), 10.9% chose not to answer
- Racial Identification:** 6.8% (N=31) Asian, 8.3% (N=38) Black/African-American, 12.7% (N=58) Indigenous/American Indian/Native American/Alaskan Native, 0.4% (N=2) Middle Eastern/Arab, 4.0% (N=18) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 54.8% (N=251) White/Caucasian. 0.7% (N=3) preferred to self-identify, and 4.0% (N=18) chose not to answer
- Gender Identification:** 47.9% (N=217) male, 45.3% (N=205) female, 1.1% (N=5) gender non-conforming, 0.7% (N=3) bigender, 0.4% (N=2) genderqueer, 0.4% (N=2) non-binary/agender, 0.4% (N=2) transgender, and 0.7% (N=3) two-spirit. 0.4% (N=2) preferred to self-identify, and 2.6% (N=12) chose not to answer

Measure:

Brief Trauma Questionnaire (BTQ; Schnurr et al., 1999)

- Structured to assess for the presence of Criterion A of DSM-5-TR (APA, 2022) diagnostic criteria for PTSD
- “Yes” or “No” options for whether an individual has experienced each listed traumatic event
- If an individual responds “yes” to experiencing a traumatic event, follow-up questions ask whether the individual believed they were in danger of being seriously injured or killed, and whether they were seriously injured
- One question was added to the BTQ for this study: “Have you ever been incarcerated in a prison or jail?” Individuals who responded “yes” were asked the same follow up questions (i.e., “Did you think your life was in danger or you would be seriously injured?” and “Were you seriously injured?”)

Procedures:

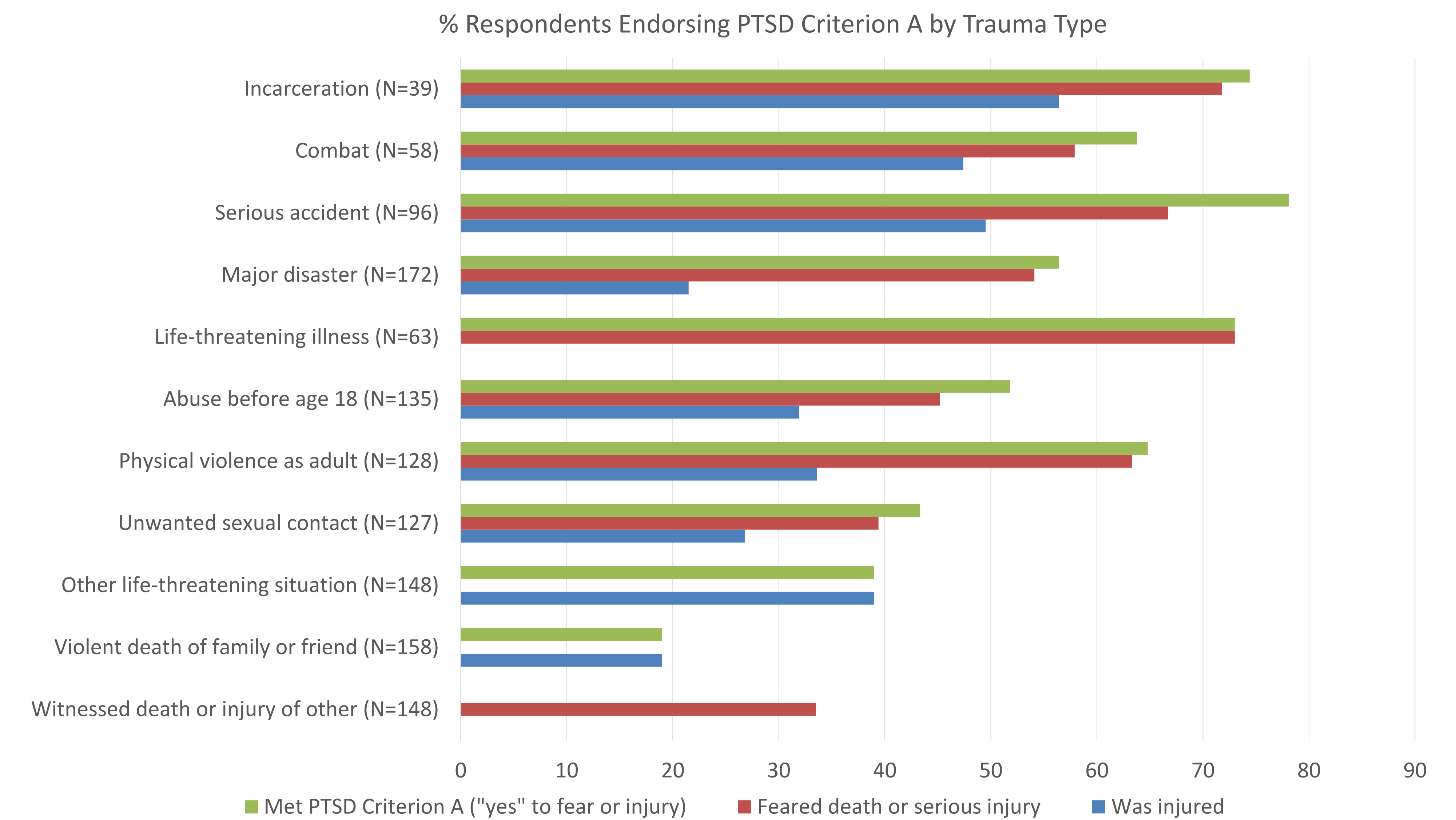
- Anonymous survey administered online via Qualtrics
- Recruitment via social media, dissemination to various professional listservs, and physical posters in cafes
- Ethics approval from Pacific University’s Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to dissemination.

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RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Figure 1. Percentage of participants endorsing criterion A of PTSD, by type of traumatic experience.



- Note: Some BTQ questions (i.e., illness, other situation, death of loved one) included only one follow up question. One BTQ item (witnessed death/injury) did not include follow up questions.
- 74.4% of those with a history of incarceration endorsed Criterion A for PTSD, indicating they either thought their life was in danger or they would be seriously injured while incarcerated, or they were seriously injured while incarcerated
- Only serious accident was associated with higher rates of Criterion A endorsement (78.1%), though having a life-threatening illness was nearly as high (73%)
- Trauma was rather common in this US community sample. The most frequent type of traumatic experience endorsed was major disaster (N=172, 37.6%), followed by violent death of a loved one (N=158, 34.5%), witnessing death or injury of another (N=148, 32.3%), and other life-threatening situation not covered by other BTQ items (N=148, 32.3%).
- The percentage of those who feared death or serious injury while incarcerated was greater than that for most other traumatic events. This is suggestive of the overall experience of anxiety common in carceral environments.
- Given that the questions in the BTQ are structured to assess for events which meet Criterion A of the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, these results suggest that the experience of incarceration is similar to events which qualify for this criterion in the level of perceived danger during the experience.
- These results point towards a need for better assessment and intervention of trauma for individuals experiencing incarceration.

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