

The interaction between young masculinities, trauma and prison

Nina Vaswani, CYCJ

Why focus on male trauma?

Boys and young men are overrepresented in the justice system, and especially so in the [prison estate](#) where around 95% of people are male. We also know that people in prison are often some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised people in society and enter prison with [extensive trauma histories](#). Yet much of the narrative around trauma-informed care in prison centres is on women's experiences of trauma. This reduced academic, policy and practice attention on the [trauma of males in prison](#) may reflect the widely held perception that prison has been designed for men, as well as reflecting society's disapproval and distaste at the often-great harms caused by male violence, dominance and oppression and the fact that men are often the source of women's trauma.

While this position may have a strong basis in fact, and can challenge the compassion of many, there are real implications for human rights, prison management, rehabilitation and public safety in leaving male trauma unacknowledged or unaddressed. If males are responsible for a disproportionate level of violent behaviour and there is an association between trauma and the [level of risk](#) that males pose - to themselves as well as others - then it follows that paying attention to male trauma may improve wellbeing outcomes for males as well as contribute in some way to a reduction in male violence.

Trauma and Masculinity

Awareness and understanding of trauma, and in particular Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, emerged from the battlegrounds of the 20th Century, from the 'shell-shock' observed in WWI to the 'combat fatigue' of WWII, and the experiences of Vietnam War veterans which led to PTSD first appearing in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) in 1980. So while the first understandings of trauma may have stemmed from men's experiences, most trauma research and practice today is focused on women's experiences of trauma. The literature on trauma and masculinity mostly remains limited to the experiences of men in the armed forces, but this narrow focus does not reflect the trauma experiences of the majority of people, nor the complexities of childhood developmental trauma. What we do know about the experience of male trauma is that:

a) Trauma can cause males to express a more stereotypical or 'traditional' form of masculinity

Trauma, by its very nature, causes people to feel vulnerable, powerless and afraid. Experiencing trauma and its aftermath often leaves people feeling stigmatised, humiliated and ashamed, and with their view of the world shattered. These are difficult states and emotions for any individual to deal with, but may be especially disruptive or burdensome for males who are influenced by traditional notions of masculinity, resulting in an exaggerated performance of masculinity in an attempt to reassert power and control (Ellis et al., 2017, Elder et al., 2017). These behaviours include excessive exercise, overtly enacted heterosexuality, aggression, risk-taking and violence which, combined with trauma symptoms such as hyperarousal and hypervigilance that can result in the misinterpretation of social cues and provoke inappropriate hostile

reactions, may result in offending behaviours and contact with the justice system.

b) Masculinity may influence how males respond to trauma treatment

Females report greater lifetime exposure to trauma than males, but males often present with more PTSD symptoms, have lower usage of therapeutic interventions, and [respond less well](#) to trauma treatment than females. [Masculinity may pose barriers](#) in relation to being able to identify and articulate emotional, psychological or physical symptoms in the first place, or in wanting or feeling able to seek help for these symptoms. The high level of [speech, language and communication problems](#) among young men in the justice system is an additional disadvantage. Even if help is sought, assessment for PTSD and related disorders also relies on the verbal expression of symptoms and treatment interventions often involve talking therapies or require some form of emotional processing. Trauma treatment can be overwhelming and demanding for anyone, but confronting these emotions may cause men to feel additional loss of agency and control. It is likely for these reasons that men have [higher drop-out rates](#) from treatment and a lack of success with trauma interventions.

c) Prison, and prison masculinities, compound and exacerbate trauma

We know that the use of prison for people who have experienced trauma can be [retraumatising and expose people to new traumas](#) such as the threat of violence or witnessing distress and self-harm. While many prisoners put on a front to survive the prison experience, the problem is particularly acute among male prisoners. Although there is evidence of softer, more nuanced, [masculinities](#) beginning to emerge within prisons, reflective of a broader conceptualisation of masculinity in some sections of society, male prisons tend to remain places in which it is difficult to show emotion, or to admit to being vulnerable or afraid. Males in prison have been observed to be permanently vigilant to potential risk and [threats to their masculinity](#), causing ongoing stress and anxiety, and the hypervigilance of trauma causes people to do the same. Prison masculinities can therefore create an added burden for those who are already vulnerable through trauma.

Implications for practice

- While trauma recovery is not linear, the first step is almost always to restore [safety, stability and agency](#) to the individual. This is especially important for young men, but may be almost impossible to achieve in some criminal justice settings. However, reducing victimisation, violence and bullying in justice settings and allowing choice and agency wherever possible (for example in choosing treatment goals, or leisure activities etc) is essential.
- While many traumas occur within relationships, trauma recovery also happens within trusting relationships which can restore a sense of safety, trust and connection. This is why [social support](#) is a key ingredient for treatment success. As criminal justice interventions often remove people from their sources of social support (through community or custodial restrictions) there needs to be a focus on building new support networks or reconnecting to old ones, particularly at points of transition.
- Trauma treatment, or trauma-informed care, needs to be gender-sensitive to all genders. Understanding the barriers that certain attitudes or beliefs about masculinity can pose to presentation, help-seeking, assessment, and trauma recovery is important. Beliefs about masculinity, and the legacy of gender-role socialisation could also be explored within trauma treatment, such as redefining 'strength' in terms of help-seeking and engagement in treatment.
- The alternative masculine narratives, cooperation and compassion that already exist among young men in justice settings should be emphasised and celebrated, with opportunities to promote connections and collaborations between males maximised.
- You can access the [National Trauma Framework](#) and the [SPS Vision for Young People](#) which outlines the steps taken to create a more conducive environment and culture for trauma-informed practice. Work is ongoing in the SPS to consider how the trauma framework can be applied in the prison context.

This Info Sheet is drawn primarily from a [book chapter](#) published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2021: Vaswani, Cesaroni and Maycock (2021) *Incarcerated Young Men & Boys: Trauma, Masculinity & The Need For Trauma Informed Gender-Sensitive Correctional Care*.