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Violent offenders in a deaf prison population
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“...there is still considerable conjecture in the literature about criminality among deaf people as well as the prevalence and causes of aggression and sexual deviance reflected in deaf prison inmates (Miller & Vernon, 2002; Young et al., 2000).”

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“the following five research questions were investigated:

1. Is there a significant difference in the percentages of deaf inmates and the general prison population who were convicted of violent offenses?
2. Is there a significant difference in the percentages of deaf inmates and the general prison population who were convicted of sexual assault?
3. Is there a significant difference in the percentages of inmates and the general prison population who were convicted of robbery?
4. Is there a significant difference in the percentages of deaf inmates and the general prison population who were convicted of homicide?
5. Is there a significant difference in the percentages of deaf inmates and the general prison population who were convicted of assault?”

“This is a study of the entire population of male and female deaf state prisoners incarcerated in Texas...The Texas population of profoundly deaf offenders runs at about 85 inmates daily.”

“The total inmate population of the state of Texas ranged from 127,066 to 133,680 throughout 2001 (TDCJ Statistical Report, 2001; TDCJ Statistical Summary, 2001). Participants in this research consisted of all 99 deaf inmates incarcerated throughout a 90-day period in 2000, at which time this study was conducted. All 99 participants had a severe-to-profound hearing loss as evidenced by their prison medical records and their placement on a sheltered unit for offenders with disabilities. Of these, 89% self-reported that they were born deaf (Miller, 2001). Ninety percent used American Sign Language (ASL), home signs, or other manual communication systems as their primary mode of communication. There was essentially no difference in the racial makeup of the deaf and hearing offender groups, with roughly 43% African American, 32% White, and 25% Hispanic (Miller, 2001; TDCJ Statistical Report, 2001; Table 1).”

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Results

“Addressing the first research question, deaf and hard of hearing inmates were found to be more likely to be convicted of violent offenses than the general population. Of the 99 deaf offenders, 64.6% were convicted of violent offenses, as opposed to 49.7% of the overall Texas prison population (TDCJ Statistical Report, 2001)”

Sexual Offenses

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“Fifty-four percent of the 41 deaf offenders were convicted of sex offenses, including statutory rape, against male or female children under the age of 17, 14.6% were convicted of sexual assault against adult women, and 31.7% were convicted of sexual assaults for which no descriptive data were available (Miller & Vernon, 2002). In answer to the second research question, the 32.3% of deaf offenders incarcerated for violent sexual assault were found to make up a significantly higher percentage than those incarcerated for violent sexual assault in the hearing offender population (12.3%), $v_2(1, N = 127,066) = 36.89, p = .01$.”

Robbery, Homicide, and Assault

“A significantly lower percentage of the deaf violent offender population committed robbery than did the remaining offender population, $v_2(1, N = 127,066) = 6.45, p = .05$.”

“Nine percent of this deaf offender population were convicted of murder or attempted murder and 16% were convicted of assault, including injury to a child or disabled/elderly person (Table 2). These percentages do not represent significant differences from figures presented for the entire Texas prison population regarding homicide [$v_2(1, N = 127,066) = 0.73$, not significant] and assault [$v_2(1, N = 127,066) = 3.36$, not significant].”

Factors Associated with Violent Crimes.

“As many as 80% of all people arrested for violent offenses test positive for drugs (Siegel, 2000).”

“Only four deaf violent offenders’ medical records indicated that they had been intoxicated during the commission of their crimes, however, 62.5% reported a history of alcohol and/or marijuana use, 35.9% of whom reported the use of other substances, such as heroin, lysergic acid diethylamide, cocaine, speed, phencyclidine, inhalants, barbiturates, and hallucinogens (N = 64).”

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Reference & Summary by H. Johnson

“It is estimated that substance abuse among deaf individuals is at least as prevalent as it is among hearing individuals (Guthman, 2002).”

Intelligence

“The mean IQ of the deaf violent offenders was 93.4, as compared to the mean IQ of the total number of Texas prison offenders, which was 91.0 (TDCJ Statistical Summary, 2001). Both these scores indicate that the typical violent offender was of average range intelligence regardless of audiological status.”

Educational Achievement

“Although statistical analyses were not possible without comparison data, the average reading grade level for deaf violent offenders was grade 3.5, which is well below the 4.5–5.5 reading level of the average deaf person upon leaving school at age 18 (Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies, 1996). The average EA of offenders in Texas prisons was grade 7.4 (TDCJ Statistical Summary, 2001). For the entire population of deaf violent offenders, the average EA was 3.6 (Miller, 2001). However, 34.0% of deaf violent offenders had reading levels of 2.8 or below, which is the federal government’s standard for defining functional illiteracy.”

Communication

“Of the entire deaf offender population, there were 94 for whom language use information was available (Table 4). Of these, 89.3% (84) were using sign language or gestures to communicate, whereas the remaining offenders used spoken English or Spanish.”

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Mental Disorders

“Approximately 32.8% of the deaf violent offender population of Texas were diagnosed with a psychiatric condition, over half of whom reported symptoms of depression or a depression-related illness.”

“The deaf population experiences about the same incidence of mental illness as the hearing population (Pollard, 1994). However, because deaf people think and communicate differently than hearing people, misdiagnosis by clinicians inexperienced with this population has the potential to inflate the percentages of deaf people with mental illness (Leigh & Pollard, 2004; Pollard, 1994). Additionally, deaf persons are more at risk to experience a mental illness and substance abuse simultaneously than hearing individuals (Leigh & Pollard, 2004).”

Discussion

“In Texas prisons, for the year 2001, there were a significantly higher percentage of deaf violent offenders than hearing violent offenders in comparison to other types of offenses. Differences were also found in the types of violent offending by deaf inmates. A lower percentage of deaf violent offenders committed robberies than did the hearing offenders, whereas a higher percentage of deaf violent offenders committed sexual assaults. A possible explanation for the lower percentages of robberies among deaf violent offenders could be the language barrier.”

“Substantially more deaf violent offenders were convicted of sexual assault than was the case with hearing violent offenders... Evidence exists, which indicates that deaf children are more likely to be sexually abused than those who are hearing (Schwartz, 1995; Sullivan, Vernon, & Scanlon, 1987). Sexually abused children are at a high risk to become sex offenders (“Natural born predators,” 1994). Sexual abuse may occur due to vulnerabilities in young deaf children in terms of their living situation and communication skills. For instance, young deaf children who attend residential schools and live in dorms may be at a heightened risk for sexual abuse by older youth and caretakers. Dorm living provides greater access for youth who are engaged in sexual experimentation or adults who are sexual predators.”

“Many deaf children receive little or no sex education presented in sign language by responsible adults. This is due, in part, to the caretakers’ lack of knowledge of the appropriate signs of sexual behavior (Harry, 1984).”

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“In terms of reporting sexual abuse, deaf children who are language delayed may not possess the language skills to be able to identify body parts and actions taken against them. Previous research also suggested that deaf children who report sexual abuse may not receive an appropriate response from school administrators in terms of making police reports or removing an abuser from the campus (Sullivan et al., 1987).”

“There were no substantial differences between deaf violent offenders and the remaining hearing offender population in terms of race, sex, or IQ. However, deaf violent offenders had substantially lower levels of academic achievement and reading ability, which is representative of existing differences between deaf and hearing people in general.”

“Only small numbers of educators and service providers are aware of sign language that describes sexual behavior as used by deaf people (Harry, 1984; Job, 2004). Thus, sex education and knowledge of illegal sexual behavior is often lacking.”