

Unveiling Voices: Evacuation Experiences of Incarcerated Women in Disasters

Background

- The frequency of evacuations of incarcerated individuals in response to hazards and disasters is increasing.
- Evacuation efforts from past disasters and hazards have shown that the carceral system relies on resources from local agencies and organizations, likely overburdening systems already in high demand with limited capacity.
- Incarcerated women are a vulnerable population in disasters that are often ignored and overlooked.
 - Women, both in free society and within carceral systems, face heightened vulnerabilities during disasters, with studies indicating disproportionate impacts on their mental health and well-being.
- There is a significant existing gap in research on incarcerated women during disasters, highlighting the need for inclusive emergency planning efforts.

Objective

The study aims to understand the challenges faced by incarcerated women related to evacuations.

Methods

Focus Groups

- Researchers from Texas A&M University partnered with Lioness: Justice Impacted Women's Alliance (JIWA) to plan and implement focus groups with formerly incarcerated women across Texas.
 - Recruitment was led by Lioness members, leveraging their extensive networks and deep connections with the target population.
 - Focus groups were facilitated by Lioness members.
- Focus groups were comprised of 6-8 participants, totaling 30+ formerly incarcerated women.
 - Questions focused on experiences with disasters and prison evacuation processes while incarcerated.
 - Responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed qualitatively.



Results

Neglect

Incarcerated individuals lack the autonomy to take protective actions during disasters, relying entirely on prison staff for access to resources and safety measures.

"If you're not traumatized before you get there you will be when you leave. And it will re-traumatize you. It your your trauma will continue to meet your trauma. I mean, because even in that heat."

"You know, we're the we're the last thing that they worry about. So we're just stuck in the cell... Rehabilitation, they're not worried about it. Reintegration, they're not worried about it. It's a money making business now. They don't care about us."

Long-term Impact

Participants reported that the lack of emergency response resulted in mental health impacts, such as trauma, identity, dehumanization, and reaction to disasters after being released.

"When you try to care for somebody else is don't... Say, it's raining outside or it's freezing outside, you know, you say like, try to push them in the wheelchair, you get cased up for that."

Criminalization of Care

Participants reported incompetency to support peers due to charges of criminalization when officers and staff working in emergency management and care facilities lack proper care.

"During the pandemic... They were keeping it a secret, and the unknown is what's scary. And knowing that people were dying and how bad it was, they were talking about, like, out here in the world, I just couldn't think..."

Fear of Unknown

Study participants expressed uncertainty about emergency events in facilities while being incarcerated, causing fear and unawareness of hazardous events.



Discussion & Conclusion

- Additional research should be conducted on evacuation planning for women carceral facilities in rural and urban areas.
- Policy initiatives are recommended to address the inclusion of incarcerated women in prison evacuation processes and training of institutional officers in disaster preparedness and response planning to promote equitable outcomes in emergencies.
- This study may inform public health emergency planning to ensure that other populations such as incarcerated people are included in disaster and hazard planning efforts and that behavioral health needs are strongly considered.

Next Steps

- Publish research findings in peer-reviewed journals
- Create policy briefs to provide to relevant community and non-profit organizations, and local and state public health, behavioral health and emergency management agencies.
- Develop guides for incarcerated women, their families, corrections staff, and leadership to better understand and prepare for disaster and hazard situations.
- Pursue an NIH Research Project Grant (R01)

Study Participants

- 3 in-person and 1 virtual focus groups completed
 - Bryan
 - Weatherford
 - Austin
 - Zoom
- Focus group lasted approximately 2 hours
- 36 participants, predominantly:
 - White
 - Middle age