

# The Needs of Prisoners' Wives: A Challenge for the Mental Health Professions

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*ABSTRACT: This research assessed the needs of prisoners' wives in six areas (information, finances, relationships with friends, family relationships, grief, and relationships with children) and determined if stage of separation or previous experience with the correctional system affected those needs. High levels of need were found in each area. Women in the initial stage of separation had significantly greater need for information than women in the pre-reunion stage, but prior experience with the correctional system did not predict needs. Results suggest giving more information to the women at the time of their husbands' trials and the formation of self-help groups.*

During the past two decades, much attention has been focused on the needs of persons incarcerated in our nation's penal institutions. Mental health professionals have become increasingly active within the prison environment, offering diverse programs to help the inmates cope with their prison experience and to change inmates' behavior toward more socially acceptable norms. Although cooperation between the mental health and judicial systems has resulted in significant changes within prisons, it has, to date, failed to address a very important population. The wives of men in prison, whose lives are also radically changed when their husbands are incarcerated, have been overlooked.

The topic of the present research has been the needs of this forgotten group. Their assessment is important for two major reasons. First, professionals can only aid these women effectively once their needs are known. Second, help directed toward the wives can support the work of the mental health professionals working within prisons. The importance of family involvement has already been recognized in working with juvenile offenders (Fenton, 1959) as well as with clinical populations (e.g. Evans, Bullard & Solomon, 1961). Indeed, the family can be seen as a major untapped resource in a rehabilitative-based correctional system.

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To develop a conceptual framework for this research, a survey of the pertinent literature was undertaken. Two previous studies addressed the needs of prisoners' wives through empirical research; however, neither was conducted in the United States. One was done in England (Morris, 1965), the other in Australia (Anderson, 1966). These studies found five general areas of need: information, financial/material, social, family relationships, and help in rearing children. Surprisingly, the psychological needs arising from the separation from the husband were virtually ignored. These concerns were included in the present research, along with the areas of need identified earlier. Morris (1965) found differences between the wives of recidivists and the wives of first offenders; thus, the present study attempted to discover how previous experience with the correctional system affected the women's needs. In addition, the effect of the stage of separation from the husband was examined.

The need for information seemed acute in the previously studied wives. The complicated judicial-correctional system can baffle even those who work within it. The wife, whose life has been severely affected by this system, must obtain such basic information as the definitions of technical terms, where her husband will be, how long he will remain incarcerated and the rules concerning correspondence and visitation, as well as where and how to obtain needed services from the community. And yet, there appears to be no consistent, convenient way for this information to be obtained (Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974). Without this basic information, she is unable to define her situation. This ambiguity, in turn, can change a problematic event into a crisis situation (Hill, 1949). Furthermore, this almost inherent lack of information seems to insure a lack of support for the correctional system. It has been demonstrated that wives of mental patients are more likely to support the efforts of clinicians if information—be it encouraging or discouraging—is provided (Deasy & Quinn, 1955; Lewis & Zeichner, 1960). Morris (1965) found that wives of first offenders suffered more than wives of recidivists because they felt that their husbands had received unfair sentences. A possible explanation is that inexperienced women do not realize that their husbands will probably be released much sooner than their sentences would indicate.

The financial/material need is probably the one that is most associated with prisoners' wives. Typically, the breadwinner is gone. The literature consistently bemoans the financial strain on prisoners' families, even though welfare allows them to "eke out an existence" (e.g. Morris, 1965; Anderson, 1966; Schneller, 1975). Housing, adequate food, and clothing were found to severely strain the available budgets. Recreational events and prison visits were luxuries which could barely be afforded.

The social needs of the wives were conceptualized as stemming from the closing of the support systems of friends and the community at large. A sense of shame or stigma was found by Morris (1965) and Anderson (1966). Having to answer "embarrassing questions" concerning the whereabouts of the husband seemed so stressful to at least some of the wives that they excluded themselves from social

settings. Thus, it appears that at least some prisoners' wives lose not only the company of their husbands but also the support usually received from friends.

The existence of some strain in family relationships was also found in previous work. Although the wife's parents often offer financial support either in the form of money or shelter, some very real tensions have been shown to arise. The parents sometimes display great resentment toward the incarcerated son-in-law and encourage their daughter to divorce the trouble-maker. This open resentment of her husband (whom she may be doubting anyway) can be very painful to the wife (Anderson, 1966; Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974). Thus, the support of the family may be withdrawn at the same time it is needed. Furthermore, the wife's relationship with her in-laws is very often more strained than that with her own parents since a pattern of mutual blaming for the husband's/son's misfortune tends to develop.

Another major stress is that of children. Now that the father has been removed from the home, the mother must fulfill the extremely hectic role of the single parent. Thus, the presence of children, especially many children, was a burden (Anderson, 1966; Morris, 1965). However, children also seem to play an important role in the alleviation of loneliness (Anderson, 1966; Duvall, 1945). All in all, children seemed to be a mixed blessing. Their company is welcomed while the added responsibility for parenting is unwanted.

Although loneliness was found in the previous studies (Anderson, 1966; Schneller, 1975), there was no mention of grief, with its components of depression and anger. And yet, a study of wives of prisoners of war and servicemen missing in action (McCubbin, Hunter & Dahl, 1975) found that 73.5% of those wives experienced five or more emotional symptoms of grieving during the absence of their husbands. Thus, prisoners' wives may be more than just lonely. Without some structured help in dealing with their grief, these women are likely to experience disabling disturbances at a later period (Rosenbaum, 1944). Thus, the experience of grief was included in the present study.

As mentioned before, the present study not only assessed six areas of need, but also determined the effects of previous knowledge of the correctional system and stage of separation/incarceration on the degree of need. Two levels of each of these two variables were conceptualized. In the former, a woman was viewed as "experienced" if she had previous knowledge, either personally or vicariously, about the system. If she had no such knowledge, she was viewed as not experienced. In the latter, the woman was considered to be in the initial stage of separation if she perceived that her husband had served less than one half of his sentence. If she perceived that he had served more than one half of his sentence, she was considered to be in the pre-reunion stage.

It was hypothesized that the two variables would affect needs in the following ways: Women who had not had previous experience with the correctional system would have a greater need for information, social contacts, improved family relations, and support for psychological needs resulting from the disruption of marital ties and grief than the women who did have previous experience. The need for information, financial/material need, and the social needs would be

greater in the initial stage of separation than in the pre-reunion stage. The improved family relations, psychological needs, and the need for help in rearing children were not hypothesized to change during the course of separation.

## METHOD

In order to locate a sample of prisoners' wives, the Clinical Chaplain of the Kansas State Industrial Reformatory, a maximum security facility with an average population of 872 (in 1978), distributed forms to all the inmates of that institution explaining the study and asking for the names and addresses of the inmates' wives. Eighty men released this information. The 35 women living in Sedgwick County, Kansas, an urban area, were selected for the study.

Two female interviewers randomly divided the release forms, and went unannounced to each residence. After persistent attempts to find each subject, 21 were eventually located. Of those, only one woman did not agree to be interviewed; she did not consider herself married to the man who gave her name.

The interviewer began by describing her non-affiliation with the correctional system and the purpose of the study. It was stressed that the woman's decision to cooperate would in no way influence her husband's status with the correctional system. Confidentiality was also stressed. Once the woman agreed to be interviewed, the interviewer began the actual needs assessment.

The interviews were structured by a questionnaire developed by the first author. Twenty-seven multiple choice questions were used in the assessment of needs. Twenty short answer questions were used to obtain demographic and background information, most of which will not be discussed here.

The questionnaire was divided into distinct categories of questions. The first included questions about the independent variables. In order to determine the stage of separation, the woman was asked for the length of time which her husband had already spent in prison and the length of time yet to be served, according to her own best estimate. If she felt that the former was longer than the latter, she was classified in the initial stage of separation. If she felt that at least half of the actual sentence had already been served, she was classified as being in the pre-reunion stage. The second independent variable, experience with the correctional system, was ascertained by five questions. If the wife knew anyone else who had been previously incarcerated (husband, former husband, family member, close friend, or the woman herself) she was considered to be experienced.

The second category comprised five questions about the degree of need for information about the conviction, length of sentence, rules for correspondence and visitation, furloughs and parole, and public assistance.

The third category of questions concerned financial/material needs. The woman was asked if she needed more money for the basic necessities of life (housing, food, clothing, and medical attention), or to visit her husband, to enjoy entertainment, to keep her home in good repair and to provide transportation. The last question asked if she needed help in budgeting her money.

Social needs were assessed by six questions which asked the woman for the number of friends lost due to the husband's incarceration, the number of friends she currently had, the number of insults received because of the incarceration, the number of moves away from people who knew of the incarceration, the frequency of lying about the whereabouts of the husband, and the frequency of feeling that no one understands her experience.

The need for improved family relations was indicated by questions which asked the woman to list various members of her and her husband's family and then rate each member for his/her helpfulness.

The sixth category, consisting of two items from previous studies assessed feelings which the woman may have about the "loss" of her husband and the resulting grief which she experiences. The first was Blackwell's (1959) adaptation of the Burgess-Cotrell Marital Adjustment Scale. It asked how often the woman missed 12 aspects of her marital relationship. The second was adapted from the interview study of 215 wives of prisoners of war and servicemen missing in action (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester & Ross, 1975). It asked the woman how often she experienced each of twelve emotional symptoms which many of the previous sample experienced. This particular constellation of symptoms was chosen for comparison purposes because of the similarity of the indeterminate length of absence of the husband in both groups (and the wife's lack of control over it), and because many of the same symptoms also occur in women whose husbands have recently died (e.g., Parkes, 1972; Barrett, 1977).

The seventh category consisted of four questions about the frequency of the woman's need for help

in rearing children. Questions concerned the need to be relieved of being with the children, the need for help in making decisions about the children, the need for help in making them obey, and the need for a place for the children to stay while she is at work.

### *Data Analysis*

Each question was scored in a straightforward way. The answer choice which indicated the lowest degree of need was assigned "one". Each choice indicating higher degrees of need were assigned progressively higher numbers. The score for each need was the sum of the responses to the various questions comprising that need. The exception to this process occurred in the need to improved family relationships and the psychological needs. Instead of simply summing these responses, the mean was obtained. The effects of the two independent variables on each of the needs were then tested by seven Harmonic Analyses of Means (Edwards, 1972).

### *Results*

The mean age of the women surveyed was twenty-three. Forty percent of the sample were under twenty-one years, with only one subject (age 40) over 28 years. The youngest subject was nineteen. Seventy percent of the sample had at least one child at home. The average age of the children was twenty-one months. Sixty percent of the sample were white, thirty percent were black, five percent were Chicana, and five percent were American Indian. All but one of the women had been living with their husbands at the time of arrest.

Of the five areas explored in the need for information, information about weekend furloughs and parole was most wanted. Ninety percent of the sample stated that they needed at least some additional information about these. In fact, eighty percent stated that they needed "a lot" of information about these concerns.

The second most needed information was about rules concerning letters and visitation. Seventy percent stated that they needed at least some information about these rules. Sixty percent reported that they would like a lot of information about these. The need for information about the length of their husbands' sentences was almost as prevalent. Sixty-five percent stated that they needed at least some information about this. Both the need for information about the crime the husband was convicted of and the need for information about public assistance were evidently already met in most cases. Only 20% of the respondents stated that they needed at least some more information about these two areas.

Of the financial and material needs of these women, the need for transportation was the most stressed. Ninety percent of the women stated that they needed at least some additional money either to keep their car in running

order or to provide public transportation. Fifty percent of the sample stated that they needed a lot more money to do so. Sixty-five percent also stated that additional money was needed for visitation trips to the prison.

The need for money to provide the necessities of life was also impressive. These women needed at least some additional money for adequate housing (75%), clothing (70%), and food (55%). However, only 10% stated that they needed more money for medical attention. Fifty percent of the sample stated that they needed some more money in order to keep things around their homes in good repair. Fifty percent also said that at least some more money was needed in order to enjoy entertainment as often as they would like. However, when asked if they needed help in budgeting, only 30% stated that they wanted this service.

Social needs were assessed by questions dealing with the women's relationships with friends and acquaintances. Only two of the questions showed a high percentage of unmet needs. Fifty percent of the women stated that they often felt that they had no one with whom to talk who understands what they are going through. Thirty-five percent of the women had only a few friends.

The other questions produced less dramatic responses. Twenty-five percent of the women hid the fact that their husbands were in prison at least frequently, 25% had lost at least a few friends since their husbands' incarceration, 10% had received a lot of insults because their husbands are incarcerated, and one woman (5%) had actually moved more than a few times to get away from people who knew about her husband's incarceration.

Every subject stated that at least one member of their immediate families were still living. Although 88% stated that they had at least one family member who was at least usually helpful, the overall mean rating for helpfulness for the immediate families was 2.6 on a scale from 1 (always helpful) to 4 (never helpful). This indicates that the relationships between the women and their families were, on the whole, perceived as only sometimes helpful.

Forty percent of the women listed other relatives with whom they have contact (aunts, grandparents, etc.). Seventy-five percent of these women rated at least one of these family members as being always helpful. The mean rating for the helpfulness of the non-immediate family members was 1.8, indicating that, overall, these particular family members were usually helpful.

Seventy-five percent of the subjects stated that they kept in touch with at least one member of their husbands' families. Fifty-three percent of these subjects stated that at least one of their in-laws was helpful on a consistent basis (usually or always). The mean helpfulness rating for the in-laws with whom they kept in touch was 2.6, indicating that the relationships between the women and these particular in-laws was sometimes helpful.

The first question comprising the psychological need variable, Hill's adaptation of the Burgess-Cotrell Marital Adjustment Scale, asked how often the women missed 13 things typifying marital adjustment since their husbands had been in prison (see Table 1). Of these items, 54% of the responses fell within the range of frequently to always. Ninety percent of the women had missed seven or more of the aspects since the loss of their husbands. Furthermore, 50% had missed six or more of these aspects frequently or always.

Table 1

*Responses to Psychological Need: Adaptation of Burgess-Cotrell Marital Adjustment Scale*

Item	Responses			
	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom or Never (Responses Combined)
Companionship	30%	35%	25%	10%
Mutual Understanding	20	40	30	10
Fighting/Making up	35	15	20	30
Same Outside Interest	20	10	35	35
Cooperation	25	15	40	20
Frankness	25	0	25	25
Confidence	25	35	15	25
Love	55	20	10	15
Sharing the Interest of the Children	70	5	0	5
Good Sexual Relationship	60	15	5	20
Freedom	10	10	25	55
Dependency	20	25	10	45
Stability	15	30	30	25

The second question comprising the psychological need variable asked how often the women experienced each of twelve emotional symptoms typifying the grieving process (see Table 2). Fifteen percent of the sample had experienced six or more of the symptoms. Furthermore, 90% of these subjects stated that they experienced five or more of these symptoms on a regular basis (sometimes, frequently, or always).

Of the questions comprising the need for help in rearing children, the question concerning the need for help in making the children obey was the most prevalent. (Only the 14 women who had children were used in the analysis of this variable.) Sixty percent of those who had children said that they needed help in this area either often or always. The second most common need was that of being relieved

Table 2

*Responses to Psychological Need: Symptoms of Grief*

Symptom	Responses			
	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom or Never (Responses Combined)
Depression	0%	45%	50%	5%
Jumpiness	15	30	35	20
Fitful Sleep	15	15	55	15
Difficulty falling asleep	5	35	35	25
Waking not rested	15	15	35	35
Boredom	10	25	35	30
Rapid mood fluctua- tions*	10	15	35	35
Headaches	10	15	45	30
Feeling life is meaning- less	0	10	30	60
Poor diges- tion	5	5	20	70
Shortness of breath	0	5	15	80
Accident Proneness	10	30	25	35

\*One subject did not respond to this item.

of being with the children. Of those who had children, 46.7% stated that they often or always need to "get away." Similarly, 20% of these women stated that they frequently (often or always) needed help in making decisions about the children and 20% stated that they always needed child care while they work.

*Impact of the Independent Variables*

Harmonic Analyses of Means were performed on each of the seven dependent variables to ascertain how the independent variables (stage of separation or previous experience) affected the needs. Of the seven tests, only one

proved to be significant. The need for information was found to be significantly greater in the initial stage of separation than in the pre-reunion stage ( $F = 9.884, p < .01, 1,16$  df). Thus, the hypothesis stating that the need for information would be a function of the stage of separation was supported, but the hypotheses concerning financial and social needs as a function of stage of separation were not. The hypotheses concerning the impact of previous experiences with the correctional system were not supported either.

## DISCUSSION

The women comprising this sample had needs which were not being met by society in general or by the correctional system in particular. The information needed by the women to evaluate their situations was apparently not readily available. A noteworthy trend arose in the need for information: these women seemed to be only concerned with their present life and the expectations for the future. They did not want more information about things which have already taken place. Perhaps the women successfully gained information about events as they occurred. However, this would not explain the fact that the experienced women needed just as much information as the non-experienced women. Although information may not be wanted about past events, that information may never have been obtained. Thus, it is not that these women ever understood the sentencing procedure, it is that this confusion lost its importance to them once it was over, or perhaps the confusion was suppressed to avoid pain. This trend is especially visible in the effects of the stage of separation on the need for information. Perhaps the women in the initial stage of separation had a greater need for information than the pre-reunion stage women because they had more future within the system about which to worry.

That these women had serious financial difficulties was not surprising since such difficulties were found in previous studies (Bloodgood, 1928; Anderson, 1966; Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974; and Schneller, 1975). The women were, for the most part, living a hand-to-mouth existence. They needed more money for even the basics of life (e.g., food, clothing, housing). The women also needed money for transportation, an area not mentioned in previous studies. More money for day-to-day transportation was needed by 95% of the women. And, even though the prison is only about 50 miles away from the women's home (unlike many prisons which are located far from metropolitan areas), bus fare or gasoline money to visit the prison was prohibitive for many. The one area for which these women did not need more money was medical attention. Federal medical insurance for low income families apparently met this need.

Even with all their financial needs, only a small minority of the women wanted help in budgeting their money. They apparently had a very strong desire to manage whatever money they had without interference.

Neither stage of separation nor previous experience with the correctional system affected the financial needs. Although we hypothesized that those women

who had just lost their "breadwinner" would have more difficulty living on a restricted budget, this was not the case. Two possible explanations for this are 1) the men had not been adequate providers for their families, and 2) that even though the income had decreased, the women felt more secure about their budgets when they, rather than their husbands, controlled them.

We also hypothesized that women who had some previous experience with the correctional system might have more financial needs than those who were not experienced. However, no such differences were found. Perhaps, contrary to our assumption, both groups were at the same financial level at the time of incarceration. Another explanation is that although the experienced women had less money to begin with, they had learned from previous experience how to live on a severely restricted budget.

One of the most surprising findings of the present research concerned social needs. The women did not seem to suffer the shame/stigma which was found in the previous research (Anderson, 1966; Morris, 1965). In fact, many of these subjects seemed very open about their situations. One explanation is that women most seriously affected by the shame of their situations were the ones which could not be found easily by the investigators, due to frequent relocation. Another explanation is that the other studies were conducted prior to the resurgence of the feminist movement, which may have enabled these women to feel more confident of their own worth. The movement, which has championed the dignity of women as independent human beings rather than as appendages to their husbands, may have given the women more freedom from association with their husbands' actions.

Although the women did not experience shame, only a small minority stated that they had enough friends. Their friends were perceived as unable to understand the woman's feelings about the separation. Perhaps this is one reason why none of the women refused to be interviewed. When a stranger identified herself as someone interested in their problems, they all seemed very glad to talk. Thus, even though these women were not ashamed of their situations, they did long for understanding people with whom they could talk.

That neither the women in the initial stage of separation nor the women without experience with the correctional system had greater need in this area were interesting findings. No immediate explanation is available.

The lack of understanding which the women experienced in the relationships with their friends was also evident in their relations with their families. The women's immediate families did not support the women in a consistent fashion. This finding complements past research which found that immediate family members typically displayed open resentment toward the inmate-husband (Anderson, 1966; Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974). The women seemed reluctant to ask for understanding from persons who show such feelings. Although the members of the husbands' families whom the wives rated were not consistently helpful, they were, unlike those in past studies (Schwartz & Weintraub, 1974), as helpful as the women's immediate families. One reason for this may be that the wives, less likely to continue non-helpful relationships with in-laws than with

their own immediate family members, only listed the most helpful of their in-laws.

The present research also considered the non-immediate families. Interestingly, the non-immediate family members who were mentioned were more supportive of the wives than either the immediate or in-law families. Again, this may be a reflection of the women's choice to continue rewarding relationships.

Perhaps this selection of other family members on whom to depend was the reason that the experienced women did not, as hypothesized, need more improvement in family relationships than non-experienced women. The relationships with the immediate families and in-laws seemed to be poor at the start (the relationships were not consistently helpful even in the initial stage of separation) and perhaps they did, as predicted, deteriorate during subsequent incarcerations. However, in the course of experiencing the families' rejections, the experienced women have had the opportunity to identify more sympathetic family members on whom to rely.

As in past research, children seemed to be a mixed blessing for the women in this study. These women, too, seemed to struggle with the additional responsibilities of being "mother-father." This was demonstrated by the fact that they were comfortable with day-to-day decision-making concerning the children, a duty generally performed by the mother. However, they experienced particular difficulty in getting their children to obey, a responsibility which traditionally has been shared by fathers. All of the added responsibilities take much time to perform, which was a strain for these women. Since they did not have anyone to share in the constant care of the children, they reported the need to be "relieved" of always being with the children.

However, unlike in past studies (Anderson, 1966; Morris, 1965), the non-experienced women had just as much need for help in rearing their children as did the experienced women. Perhaps this is because none of these women had more than four children. Past studies seemed to indicate that experienced women had more trouble rearing their children because they had larger families.

The most obvious loss in these women's lives is that of their husbands' companionship. However, this loss usually has not been emphasized because of the stereotypical view of marriages in lower socio-economic groups being unstable (Goode, 1951; Roney, 1958). These women severely missed many specific aspects of their marriages. Furthermore, this sense of loss did not decrease with either experience with the system or length of separation.

That these women grieve is no longer conjecture. In comparison with wives of prisoners of war and servicemen missing in action, more of these wives experienced emotional symptoms typical of grief. For only two of twelve symptoms (poor digestion and shortness of breath) was the percentage of prisoners' wives reporting the symptom lower. Neither time nor experience seemed to alleviate the sense of loss or the subsequent grieving of these women. Women in the pre-reunion stage were just as grief-stricken because of the loss of their husbands as those in the initial stage. Women who had experienced a

previous loss to the correctional system experienced just as much grief as the non-experienced women. Thus, the notion that prisoners' wives can easily form substitute relationships while their husbands are in prison was dispelled by these findings. Furthermore, the findings suggest that an adequate method of coping with their grief was not available.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Given the small size of the present study sample, it is clear that additional studies are needed in this area. Future studies could include a wider continuum of stages of separation to determine more precisely the effects of this variable on needs. Also, a larger sample would allow the inclusion of control variables such as number of children, perceived helpfulness of the children, perceived cause of husband's criminality, and degree of knowledge of husband's criminal activities. Such variables could influence the needs of the women.

Although further study is indicated, this research demonstrated that prisoners' wives have needs which are not being met by either the correctional system or other social service systems. Since incarceration of convicted felons will continue, mental health professionals in both prisons and community settings need to work together to attend to the needs of prisoners' families.

One way to begin is to make information about the correctional system available to the wives either during or immediately after the trials of their husbands. A description of the prison, and an explanation of prison regulations and programs would help the wives cope with their new situations. Although no one can tell the women the exact duration of their husbands' incarcerations, some information about how parole eligibility is determined would enable the women to plan their lives around a more certain date.

The formation of self-help groups for prisoners' wives could be facilitated by existing agencies. These groups could be the vehicles for prisoners' wives to express common concerns and work through their problems and grief. They would provide a way of meeting friends, and could also serve to familiarize the women with available social services. Another service which could be implemented by social service agencies is inexpensive transportation to the prison. A resource person would coordinate group transportation or car-pools.

No one can shorten the length of the incarceration or fill the void created by the loss of a loved one. However, the above mentioned programs, based on identified needs, could lessen the trauma which prisoners' wives are now forced to endure.

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