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UNDERSTANDING THE LINKS BETWEEN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ILLEGAL ACTIVITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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NIJ funded this study designed to explore the relationship between violence against women and women's involvement in illegal activity in 1999. By focusing on women of color from low-income communities who are in conflict with the law, the project fills critical gaps in the existing literature on violence against women and female criminality. The research was conducted at the Cook County Jail in Chicago, Illinois. A survey was administered to 298 women who were detained there to determine the extent of the abuse in the population, to reveal the nature of the abuse and to identify women to participate in in-depth, life history interviews. The survey results showed a significant number of the women have experienced violence, that there were multiple perpetrators of abuse in most cases, the abuse had serious consequences and in some cases it was directly linked to the women's involvement in illegal activity.

Based on the survey results, 33 women were recruited to participate in in-depth, life history interviews. Analysis of the qualitative results revealed a distinct pattern that showed how conditions in low-income communities for women influence their experience of violence as they grow up, and how the experience of being abused is linked with their later criminality. The life history interviews showed how women's experience of violence takes on complex meaning when it is experienced within the context of

disadvantaged communities and how victimization is shaped by racial and gender identity as well as social position. Recommendations for a shift in intervention strategies, policy reform and further research are discussed in this report in order that this very vulnerable group is better served by the anti-violence research and advocacy communities.

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