Girls Behaving Badly? Or Just One of the Boys? A Quantitative Analysis

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Data tables from original submission have been excluded

Introduction

Are you a woman suffering from penis envy or sexual frustration? Perhaps you are sneaky, deceitful, or just an emotionally "cold fish." Now let me ask: do you want to be a teacher, a nurse? No, you don't have such lofty goals? Well, then, do you think you can make a living as a maid? Or maybe you are absolutely certain that one day you will be the world's greatest homemaker. Have I ignited just a little spark of curiosity? First, let me assure you that I am not researching topics for Jerry Springer or Oprah. Then what, you must be asking yourself by now, do the aforementioned elements have in common? Believe it or not, they are all strands of thought about women's criminality. (Bisi, 2002)

In the past, the low numbers of women in the criminal population were seen as inconsequential to the study of deviance. Empirical and psychological studies of individual offenders focused only on investigating and explaining male criminality. When considered at all, the phenomena of women's criminality was subjected to "male theorizing" by some notable figures. Sigmund Freud thought women irrational and interpreted women offenders as longing for a penis. Cesare Lombroso characterized women with short dark hair, moles and masculine features as good candidates for becoming criminals. W. I. Thomas claimed sexually frustrated women released sexual energy in criminal acts. Otto Pollack asserted that women offenders preferred professions as maids, nurses, teachers, and homemakers that allowed them to engage in undetectable crimes. (faculty.ncwc.edu/toconnor – updated 01/28/2004) This male theorizing, along with the historically subordinate position of women, led to women's criminality being credited to such bio-psychological traits as weakness and limited self-consciousness (Bisi, 2002). The acts of women offenders were viewed as an alteration of personality, a masculine tendency. In other words, they were trying to be "one of the boys" and "behaving badly" in the process.

Fortunately, more recent research has begun to take a more realistic look at women's criminality. Modern theories range from the Freda Adler's emancipation theory (increased economic opportunities allow women to be as crime prone as men) to the economic perspective (during times of economic stability the number of women committing crimes decreases) (Steffensmeier, 2001). Increasingly, sociologists and criminologists are examining the social and economic factors that directly impact women's criminality. A woman's position in society and crime could be the result of intricate socioeconomic, political and historical factors. Low percentage rates of criminal offending suggest that women as a group are not criminally motivated. If this is true, what forces influence these women's choices? By studying some of the social factors governing the lives of women offenders, I attempt to answer my own research question: *What factors influence women's criminality?*

The importance of finding the answers to this question increases with the number

of female arrests. In 2000, 22 percent of all arrests were of women, and the female prisoner population has doubled since 1990 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Of equal importance is the relative social and economic status of women, which research suggests is strongly impacted by female marginality (Steffensmeier, 1989). Historically, women have been viewed and treated as second-class citizens in our society. Slowly this is changing, but their consignment to low-paying jobs and their lack of access to the power and authority in male-dominated settings influence the choices women make, not just the positive choices they can make within the social structure of our society, but also the negative ones. Additionally, women may be committing offenses as a result of poverty and inequality. Unfair conditions, whether due to unemployment, low income, lack of educational opportunities, domestic violence or drug abuse, should be of importance to all members of society.

Pathways into Crime

In my effort to understand women's criminality, I pose three propositions related to the likelihood that a woman will be involved in criminal activity. From the research conducted to support the propositions emerged three questions. First, *How does physical and sexual abuse affect the likelihood that a woman will commit a crime?* According to the report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2000, 57 percent of women incarcerated in state prisons reported that they were physically and/or sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. This abuse may result in homelessness, substance abuse and economic marginality that force them into survival by illegal means. Some women are coerced to engage in crime by abusive partners or arrested for defending themselves against abuse, while others are arrested for not protecting their children from domestic violence. Consequently, *Women who have experienced sexual and/or physical abuse are more likely to be involved in criminal activity than women who have not experienced sexual and/or physical abuse (Proposition 1).*

Secondly, *How do intimate relationships with deviant men affect the likelihood that a woman will commit a crime?* Intimate relationships typically are a powerful influence on all people, "but women take greater risks to sustain valued relationships" (Allans and Steffensmeier, 1996). Also, females are socialized from an early age to nurture relationships by being submissive and passive, and associations with violent deviant males often bring the added dimension of abuse. Subsequently, criminal involvement could result from coercion (abuse or threats of violence). Consider emotional and financial dependence on a male involved in criminal activity combined with exposure to criminal environments (i.e., living with someone involved in criminal acts such as selling drugs or robbery) and the likelihood of a woman committing a crime increases. Thus, *Women in relationships with deviant men are more likely to be involved in criminal activity than women who are not in relationships with deviant men (Proposition 2).*

Third, *How does a woman's substance abuse affect the likelihood that she will commit a crime?* One-third of women serving time in state prisons said they had committed the crime for which they were serving time in order to support their need for drugs (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). The nature of substance abuse eliminates options for obtaining money through legitimate means. Drug use is an expensive, as well as destructive, lifestyle.

The demanding routine of everyday drug use makes it hard for the addict to maintain employment or positive support mechanisms. Family and friends of drug addicts find that, for their own well-being, they have to distance themselves, both emotionally and financially, from the substance abuser. As a result, crime becomes the path to sustaining their drug use (www.drugstrategies.com/ks1998/ s_court.html). Therefore, *Women with substance abuse problems are more likely to be involved in criminal activity than women without substance abuse problems (Proposition 3).*

Methodology

It is a long way from posing theories in the form of propositions to collecting data in support of them. First, my concepts had to be converted into the variable form. Variables are characteristics or properties that can vary; in other words, they must be tangible and measurable (Schutt, 2001). Then, I used a deductive research strategy to hypothesize relationships between criminality, abuse, relationships and substance abuse. Specifically, the expectations were that a woman's involvement in criminal activity (dependent variable) would be influenced by sexual/physical abuse, intimate relationships and use of illegal drugs (independent variables).

Sampling, Respondents and Survey Procedures

I conducted this study, acting as principal investigator and using quantitative research methods including the creation and use of a survey questionnaire. There were no co-investigators, no interviewing or taping of respondents, and no use of any existing data. The survey asked respondents about exposure to criminal activity, abuse history and intimate relationships. In addition to the survey, each respondent was given a study information sheet and a list of support groups that provide confidential help related to the issues addressed in the survey.

Recent research suggests that women as a group do not commit many crimes, but that there has been a substantial increase in the number of women being arrested. For this reason, only women were surveyed. Forty-four female respondents were recruited. One-half of the respondents were selected using the "snowball" sampling method. Snowball sampling identifies hard-to-reach or hard-to-identify members of a group or population by identifying one member and then asking that member to identify others, and so on. I attended meetings of a support group (of which I am a member) and spoke to members of the group about participation in the survey. The remaining respondents were selected using the "available" sampling method on the IUSB campus. This meant that respondents were selected to participate solely on the basis of availability. Female students were approached in the lounges and eating areas of the campus for voluntary participation. No students were approached during class time.

I hand-distributed the surveys, which took approximately 3–5 minutes to complete. To ensure confidentiality, once the survey was distributed, the respondent was left alone to complete it privately. Each survey was numbered in pencil on the back for the purpose of tallying the total number of surveys, but there were no names or identifiers of any kind on the survey documents. Completed surveys will remain part of the research data because

they are not identifiable. Reports of the survey will be made using aggregate information only.

Due to the serious nature of the subject of criminality, confidentiality was a major ethical concern. The question of whether respondents had committed a felony offense could be perceived as incriminating. To allay any apprehension regarding confidentiality, no identifiers of any kind appeared on the survey documents and respondents were allowed to complete the surveys privately. They were also given self-addressed stamped envelopes in which they could return the survey via U.S. mail. It was also necessary to provide additional assurances to the support group respondents selected using the "snowball" method (referred by other respondents). In order to maintain group anonymity, no group members were approached outside of the meeting place. Also, since coercion was another major ethical concern, I feel it is important to add that although I am a member of the support group, I do not hold any position where power (explicit or implicit) over other members could be perceived. All respondents were informed in writing that participation was voluntary, and that they could decline participation at any point.

Of equal concern were the highly sensitive and personal questions on physical/ sexual abuse, intimate relationships and substance abuse. Realizing that the questions could inadvertently provoke strong emotional responses, the respondents were encouraged to contact either me or the faculty sponsor with any problems or questions. They were also provided with a list of support groups who provide confidential help relating to the sensitive issues addressed in the survey.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Hypothesis 1: Women who have been the victim of rape, molestation, and/or physical violence are more likely to have committed a felony criminal offense than women who have not been the victim of rape, molestation, and/or physical violence. (Table 1)

The cross tabulation indicates that women who have been the victim of rape, molestation, and/or physical violence are more likely to have committed a felony criminal offense than women who have not been the victim of rape, molestation, and/or physical violence. For example, Table 1 shows that 61.5% of women who have been a victim of rape, molestation, and/or physical violence have committed a felony criminal offense, while only 33.3% of women who have not been the victim of rape, molestation, and/or physical violence have committed a felony criminal offense. Thus, my hypothesis is supported by the results.

Hypothesis 2: Women with close associations to men who have committed crimes are more likely to have committed a felony criminal offense than women who do not have close associations with men who have committed crimes. (Table 2)

The cross tabulation clearly suggests that women with close associations to men who have committed crimes are more likely to have committed a felony criminal offense than women who do not have close associations with men who have committed crimes. Table 2 shows that 67.9% of women with close associations to men who have committed crimes have committed a felony criminal offense. In contrast, only 18.8% of women who did not have close associations with men who have committed crimes have committed a felony

criminal offense. The results of this crosstabulation support my hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: The more frequently a woman has used illegal drugs in the past 15 years, the more likely she is to have committed a felony criminal offense than a woman who has not used illegal drugs in the past 15 years. (Table 3)

The crosstabulation strongly suggests that the more frequently a woman has used illegal drugs in the past 15 years, the more likely she is to have committed a felony criminal offense than a woman who has not used illegal drugs in the past 15 years. For example, Table 3 shows that 90% of women using drugs 1 to 4 or more times a day in the past 15 years have committed a felony criminal offense, while only 31.8% of women who responded they had never used illegal drugs in the past 15 years have committed a felony criminal offense. Therefore, the results of this crosstabulation strongly support my hypothesis.

Conclusions

Overall, the data from this survey provide strong support for the propositions presented in my study. Victimization through sexual and/or physical abuse and intimate relationships with men who have committed crimes both seem to figure prominently in whether or not a woman chooses to commit a felony criminal offense. One could speculate that the high rate of violence in these women's lives is linked to their involvement in criminal activity. It also suggests that abuse may be an environmental cause of female offending. The women may be led to offend by living in places where illegal activity is going on. There could be patterns of coercion and entrapment into crime by abusive partners. Women have been socialized to value relationships and attachment and often make choices based on these interpersonal experiences.

We must also consider that women fleeing abuse often end up on the streets with no viable means of employment; they may turn to illegal activities such as prostitution or shoplifting as a means of economic survival. Life on the streets is dangerous and these women may end up with pimps or in other abusive relationships with partners who are involved in crime. Of interest also was evidence of a correlation between abuse and relationships with men involved in criminal activity. A cross tabular analysis of all women surveyed showed that 79% of women with close associations with men who committed crimes had also been the victims of abuse, while only 25% of women with no close associations with men who committed crimes had been the victim of physical/sexual abuse. (Table 4)

Although my survey sample was relativity small, the high rate of substance abuse among women who had committed a felony offense was tremendously evident. Fifteen women out of the total of 22 surveyed who had committed a felony criminal offense engaged in illegal drug use at the time of their first felony; in contrast, only seven had never engaged in illegal drug use at the time of their first felony (Table 5). According to recent research, nearly three-fourths of women in the criminal justice system were using drugs prior to their arrest (Allard, 2002). It is assumed that female addicts will most likely engage in prostitution to support their drug habit, but it may be even more common for these women to be involved in property crimes. Also, procuring drugs is a felony offense in most states, which further places women substance abusers at risk.

In no way do I feel that the questions I asked were exhaustive. Given more time and resources, I would like to examine how income, education, and race impact a woman's criminality. Further, recent changes in welfare, housing, drug enforcement and mandatory arrest, as well as prosecution and sentencing, policies, all need to be studied as possible influences. I believe a longitudinal design would lend itself better to the subject. The information from this type of study would be more time-ordered, and independent variables could be examined prior to variation in the dependent variable.

Reflections on Research

In regards to the methodology used in conducting my study, my access was limited to women who had committed a felony offense. Because of restrictions placed on me by the university's Human Subjects Commission, I was unable to approach any women who were incarcerated for committing felony offenses. To address this limitation, I chose to sample from a support group of which I was a member because I knew that many of the group members have been involved in criminal activity. Thus, I was successful in accessing the requisite number of women who had committed a felony criminal offense, but, because this sample was taken from a group with a high percentage of criminal offenders, it was not random. Thus, I am unable to generalize my findings to other groups or populations. Still, I feel this in no way diminishes the correlation between the independent variables of physical/sexual abuse, intimate relationships and substance abuse and the dependent variable of criminal involvement.

Moreover, while I feel that the four questions I asked provided insight into the factors that may influence women to commit crime, I wanted to also examine possible causes. In order to do this, I added two questions relating to intimate relationships at the time of first felony and frequency of drug use at the time of the "first" felony criminal offense. Only respondents that answered "yes" to committing a felony criminal offense were required to respond to these questions. Additionally, the answers to the two questions on frequency of drug use both showed a positive skew. To deal with this, these questions were recoded. Despite the recode, the only meaningful distinction seemed to be between women who had never used illegal drugs and those who had.

Considering the academic controls, time restraints and available resources, I addressed both the ethical and methodological concerns as best I could. The subject of women's criminality is not only an important societal issue, but it is challenging in terms of its complexity and scope. A woman's productive value is just as vital a contribution to society as a man's. Thus, women's criminality should be of equal concern, as it negatively impacts this contribution. Hopefully, social researchers will recognize this and give the subject the concern that it deserves.

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