Gendergender

Although gender is likely the strongest predictor of criminal involvement, its influence on offending is not well understood. In fact, early theorizing about the causes of crime tended to focus on structural forces rather than gender. Recent work, however, particularly that conducted by feminists, highlights the disparity in male and female offending and victimization rates and explores why these differences persist over time and place.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Whereas *sex* is defined as the biological and physiological division between men and women, *gender* refers to the disparity between males and females that is socially constructed and reinforced by institutions, culture, and everyday interactions. Gender differences are most apparent when examining the social stereotypes that result in different attitudes, actions, and expectations of masculinity and femininity.

In fact, *sex* and *gender* are often used interchangeably by researchers, perhaps because of the difficulty in discerning whether differences between women and men can be attributed to biological or sociological forces. For example, whereas it may be argued that men are more aggressive than women because the former have higher levels of testosterone, it also is true that disparity in aggression and violence are influenced by differences in socialization processes. Parents, teachers, and friends often reward the aggressive behavior of boys and discourage them from appearing weak or sensitive, while encouraging girls to be "nice" and refrain from physical displays of anger. These examples illustrate the need for a closer examination of our beliefs about the innate natures of women and men and increased awareness of the ways in which society influences these perceptions.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN OFFENDING

Likewise, gender disparities in offending have long been noted by criminologists, but traditional theorists assumed that the overrepresentation of men in the criminal justice system was a simple reflection of male biology and needed no further exploration. By contrast, recent theorizing about the causes of crime, particularly that produced by feminist theorists, emphasizes that a better understanding of the relationship between gender and crime will improve our ability to predict and prevent criminal involvement.

Despite their varying theoretical perspectives, criminologists agree that men commit the majority of crimes. Numerous sources, including arrest records, victimization reports, and self-report surveys, provide evidence for this claim. According to 1995 data from the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), men accounted for approximately 81 percent of all arrests and were arrested more frequently than women for all crimes except prostitution (Steffensmeier 2001). Although self-report studies reflect somewhat smaller differences in male and female participation in crime, data from the National Youth Survey—a longitudinal study of adolescents living across the United States—reveal that women are underrepresented in every category of delinquency and crime (Canter 1982). Similarly, information from the 1994 National Crime Victimization Survey also reflects a gendered involvement in crime, with female perpetrators accounting for only 5 percent of all burglaries, 8 percent of all robberies, and 15 percent of all simple assaults (Steffensmeier 2001). The largest disparity between female and male crime rates is participation in violent offenses. UCR data demonstrate that women accounted for only 13.5 percent of all arrests for violent offenses in 1995 (versus 26 percent of all arrests for property offenses), including only 9 percent of all homicides.

Research reveals that gender differences in criminal offending have held steady over time, place, and culture. Although the media have proclaimed the emergence of a "new, violent female criminal," there has been little evidence to support this view. Arrest records reveal some convergence in male and female involvement in crime, with the proportion of female arrests increasing from 11 percent in 1960 to 19 percent in 1995. This trend can largely be explained, however, by increases in arrests for nonviolent crimes

such as larceny, theft, and fraud. For the majority of other offenses, the female percentage of all arrests has increased only slightly (1 or 2 percent in each decade), and data reveal that the proportion of female homicides has decreased over time. Thus, convergence in female and male rates of offending is the result of women's increasing participation in nonviolent crimes, rather than acts of violence. Moreover, even though women's overall participation in crime has increased, female offenders still account for less than 20 percent of all criminal arrests (Steffensmeier 2001). The overrepresentation of males as violent offenders is not limited to the United States. Instead, cross-national data indicates that women represent a very small percentage of homicide offenders (the only crime for which detailed, comparable, and reliable records exist), and their homicide arrest rates have either remained steady or decreased over the past twenty years (Kruttschnitt 2000). In addition to gender differences in rates of offending, research demonstrates that women and men often engage in different types of offending, and the context of their crimes also differs. For example, UCR data reveal that minor property crimes such as larceny and fraud comprise a larger proportion of women's crime than of men's crimes, accounting for one-quarter of all female arrests, compared to only 12 percent of male arrests. Similarly, prostitution accounts for a larger percentage of female arrests, while a larger proportion of male arrests are for crimes against persons and major property crimes. Women differ from men not only in their propensity for committing violent offenses, but also in their motivations for engaging in such crimes. For example, homicide studies indicate that when women kill, they are more likely than males to target intimate partners and/or family members. In contrast, male homicides tend to be instrumental, committed during felonies or occurring during fights to "save face." Female homicide offenders also tend to be older than males, with involvement peaking in the twenties and continuing into the thirties, while male rates peak earlier and end earlier.

These trends suggest that patterns of offending reflect differences in gender roles, behaviors, and opportunities. For example, women's greater involvement in minor property crime such as shoplifting, check fraud, and credit card fraud can be viewed as an extension of the female consumer role and women's greater likelihood of shopping for their families. Similarly, female criminals often report that the items they stole were necessities for themselves or their children, which they could not afford to buy. In fact, there is mounting evidence of a "feminization of poverty," resulting from women's segregation into low-paying jobs and single-parent status, that may increase their involvement in crimes of economic gain, especially welfare fraud. Likewise, interviews with female prostitutes reveal that many began sex work as a means to support themselves and their children when faced with limited or no access to other resources or to legitimate means of earning money.

GENDER AND VICTIMIZATION

The relationship between gender and victimization follows a pattern similar to that between gender and offending, with men comprising the majority of victims but women overrepresented as victims of particular crimes. Most notably, women are much more likely to be victims of sexual assault and intimate partner violence than are men. In fact, 1998 statistics from the Bureau of Justice indicate that women are three times more likely to report domestic violence victimization and four times more likely to be victims of stalking than men, and women over the age of twelve accounted for 98 percent of all rape victims (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Not surprisingly, women are also more at risk for victimization in their homes and by someone they know, and they are more likely to be injured during such assaults than men. Similar evidence exists for juveniles, with boys slightly more likely than girls to be victims of crime (comprising 55 percent of victims), according to 1997 National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data (Finkelhor and Omrod 2000). In addition, girls are more likely to be victims of sex offenses and kidnappings (representing 82 and 63 percent of all victims, respectively), and boys are more likely to be victims of robbery and larceny (comprising 91 and 69 percent of all victims). Again, it is likely that the disparity in victimization reflects differences in gender roles and opportunity. For example, societal mores dictate that girls be kept close to home, and, as a result, they are more likely to be victimized by family members. By contrast, boys, whose activities and peers are not as heavily monitored, are more likely to be victimized outside the home, by strangers in two-thirds of all victimization cases (compared to one-third for women).

DIFFERENTIAL PROCESSING BY THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Gender disparity occurs not only in rates of victimization and offending but also in processing by the criminal justice system. It is difficult, however, to determine the specific ways in which gender impacts sentencing and incarceration. For example, the "chivalry" hypothesis predicts that women receive more lenient sentences than men because they are viewed as either less threatening or more in need of protection from the harsh conditions of prison. There is little empirical support for this hypothesis, however, as evidence demonstrates that men and women who commit similar crimes tend to receive similar

sentences.

Feminists propose a more complex relationship between gender and sentencing, positing that women and girls will receive lighter sentences if their crimes conform to traditional gender roles but harsher treatment when they oppose gender stereotypes. For example, a study of judicial sentencing revealed that judges were sympathetic toward women with children, asserting that imprisoning mothers resulted in a higher cost to society than setting them free. Moreover, judges deemed women's caregiving responsibilities as the most important factor in determining sentencing. By contrast, they did not feel that providing financial support to children was as critical; as a result, judges were not more likely to give fathers lighter sentences. As this example illustrates, society continues to expect mothers to provide emotional support and fathers to provide financial resources to children, and, in this case, social stereotypes work in favor of female offenders (as long as they conform to their ascribed gender role).

By contrast, women who cross gender boundaries may encounter less sympathy from the criminal justice system. For example, girls tend to be arrested more frequently than boys for crimes such as truancy and running away, which may be characterized as antifeminine rebellions that do not uphold the virtues of passivity, virginity, and obedience. Moreover, girls are subjected to a double standard by caregivers and criminal justice officials, who view them as more in need of protection and control then boys. Because their actions are monitored more closely, their offenses are more likely to be discovered and punished. Girls' delinquency is viewed as especially dangerous and in need of reformation when it relates to their sexuality, and girls' offenses are often actively sexualized. In fact, as late as the mid-twentieth century, criminal justice officials systematically questioned female offenders about their sexual experiences, and tests of virginity were routinely performed. Girls who admitted to or were deemed "guilty" of engaging in consensual sex were more likely to receive additional charges.

Stiffer penalties for nontraditional female offenders also can be seen in the late twentieth and early twentyfirst-century War on Drugs, which has resulted in disproportionate numbers of women being arrested and sentenced for drug-related crimes. In fact, over onethird of women in prison are currently incarcerated for drug offenses, compared to one-fifth of men. This differential treatment may reflect social stereotypes regarding appropriate masculine and feminine behavior. For example, female drug offenders may be viewed as more deviant than males, because society dictates that women should not engage in heavy drug use or in crime. Female addicts who are also mothers are viewed as especially evil, for their dependency often leaves them unable to adequately care for their children. Feminists assert that women's drug addiction must be understood in context and should not automatically result in lengthy sentences. There is considerable evidence that many female offenders have histories of physical and sexual victimization, and this abuse may lead victims to use drugs to self-medicate (i.e., to counter the low self-esteem and trauma caused by victimization). Feminists advocate treatment rather than incarceration for these women, but the criminal justice system (and society) has been reluctant to adopt this view.

The increase in women in prison has further implications. Many feminists note that although the female incarceration rate is rapidly increasing, adequate services for female offenders are severely lacking. This is especially true in facilities housing both sexes, in which services designed specifically for women are minimal or nonexistent. Thus, many feminists call for better programming for female offenders, including gender-specific services that will provide women with treatment for victimization and/or drug addiction, as well as vocational programs to bolster their ability to provide for themselves and their children.

EXPLANATIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER ON CRIME

Despite the multitude of evidence demonstrating gender differences in offending and victimization, it is difficult to understand the specific ways in which gender affects crime. In fact, numerous studies reveal much similarity between male and female offending. For example, both female and male criminals are least likely to be involved in violent crimes and most likely to be arrested for nonviolent crimes. Similarly, crossnational data demonstrate that countries having high rates of male arrests also have high rates of female arrests, and countries with low rates of male offending have low rates of female offending. Likewise, trends in arrests are similar for men and women: when men's crime is on the rise, so is women's, and the same is true for declining or steady arrest rates. Offender characteristics also are similar, with both male and female violent criminals most likely to be younger than thirty; poor; unemployed; members of minority groups; residents of neighborhoods characterized by high rates of poverty, female-headed households, and residential instability; and dependent on drugs and alcohol.

These patterns suggest that the etiology of offending may be similar for men and women, especially when examining the structural correlates of crime. In fact, many scholars assert that the same theories can be

used to explain male and female offending, and there is some evidence demonstrating that macro-level perspectives of crime, such as strain, differential association, and social control theories, are relevant for both sexes. Thus, many scholars assert that the same criminogenic forces influence women and men, but that the gender disparity in offending can be explained by differential exposure to these influences. For example, it may be that females commit fewer crimes than males because they do not face the same pressure for material success (strain theory), are less exposed to delinquent peers (differential association), and are subject to greater supervision and encouraged to form greater social bonds with others (social control theory).

By contrast, many feminists argue that this reasoning cannot adequately explain why women and men face different levels of exposure and reaction to criminogenic influences, and they emphasize that the ways in which gender impacts institutions, culture, and everyday interactions—and, ultimately, criminal involvement—must be examined in much more detail. Moreover, they assert that separate theories of offending are warranted not only because women's and men's lives are very different but also because traditional theories were specifically created to explain male offending and did not take women's experiences into account. In particular, feminists urge that theories of female offending that are women-centered and rely on detailed examinations of women's lives are especially needed. In the past, explanations of female criminality were based on chauvinistic and stereotypical views of women and depicted female offenders as "unnatural" and devious. Even more recent attempts to explain women's involvement in crime have been limited in their exploration of sex roles and stereotypes. For example, the "liberation hypothesis" espoused in the 1970s theorized that as women gained status and power in society (and became more masculine) their involvement in crime would increase (to mirror that of men's). This theory, however, was based on the assumption that women would be able to make great advances in society, occupy high-status jobs, and be viewed as equal to men in ability and intelligence. In fact, research indicates that such widespread emancipation has not been achieved, convergence in male and female crime rates has not occurred, and most female offenders hold traditional views of femininity and masculinity.

Feminists seek to replace these inadequate theories of female offending with more detailed examinations of women's lives and experiences. For example, many feminists conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews with female criminals to allow women to tell their own stories and better illuminate the forces that lead them to break the law. Although feminists recognize that there are many pathways to crime, one of the most widely accepted theories of female offending proposes that women's crimes are often directly related to their histories of victimization. In fact, studies reveal that a large percentage of female offenders have been victims of violent crime, including physical or sexual abuse as children, sexual assault, or intimate partner violence. Often, childhood maltreatment may cause girls to run away from home and commit property crimes (especially prostitution) to survive on the streets. Many of these women also report drug or alcohol dependency, with many using illicit substances to counteract the trauma of victimization. Dependency typically prolongs involvement in crime, as women commit more crimes to buy drugs. Intimate partner victimization also may lead to involvement in crime, as victims may be forced by their partners to break the law—hoping to reduce the amount of violence they endure—or engage in illegitimate money-making schemes (such as prostitution or shoplifting) to support their and their partners' drug addictions.

Although such theories contribute to our understanding of female offending, their failure to directly compare men's and women's experiences results in a limited ability to analyze gender differences in crime. Very few theories have been able to adequately address this complex issue. Recent work by Darrell Steffensmeier and Emilie Allen (1996) provides a better understanding of the ways in which gender impacts criminal involvement. Their theory utilizes a broad framework that explores social, cultural, historical, biological, and reproductive differences between men and women and illustrates how these differences influence criminality. More specifically, they identify the ways in which gender differences—including differences in norms, moral development, social control, physical strength/aggression, and sexuality—lead to disparity in men's and women's motivation, opportunity, and context of offending. For example, when women are rewarded for being nurturing and relationship-oriented, and males are taught to be aggressive and domineering, female offending is inhibited and male offending promoted. While some of these concepts are utilized in other gender-related theories of crime, Steffensmeier and Allen's work is notable for presenting a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between gender and crime, while maintaining a focus on the everyday interactions between men and women.

THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

Although this entry clearly implicates gender as a significant predictor of involvement in crime, scholars increasingly are recognizing that its influence is interrelated to other important social and demographic

characteristics, particularly race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. For example, criminals, especially violent offenders, tend to be not only male but also poor, unemployed, members of minority groups, residents of disorganized neighborhoods, and so on. Moreover, evidence suggests that involvement in crime is affected as much by race/ethnicity as gender, as evidenced in the similar arrest rates for violent crimes of African American females and white males. In addition, cross-national studies reveal that black women do not have high rates of criminal involvement in other countries, which suggests that the unique economic conditions in the United States—including high concentrations of economic disparity—are important risk factors in leading to criminal involvement. Similarly, studies of the criminal justice processing of females have found that people of color and poor women are likely to receive more punitive sentences than white women and wealthier defendants. These examples illustrate that the impact of race, class, and gender on crime are interrelated, and the relationships between these forces need further theoretical and empirical specification.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As is evident, there is much debate regarding the differential involvement in crime of women and men. The growing interest in gender issues, however, is a needed and refreshing departure from earlier theorizing about crime, which either ignored gender as a motivating force or presented inadequate or distorted views of masculinity and femininity. As recent work suggests, gender differences are rooted in multiple levels of society, and only by examining how these forces interact can we understand what motivates women and men to commit crime. Although much more investigation is needed to illuminate the complex relationship between gender and crime, as well as the intersection between gender, race/ethnicity, class, and other factors, criminologists are beginning to recognize and explore these issues.

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