

Some comparisons of female and male serious offenders

Public attention is periodically drawn to the female offender, usually as a result of media focus on a sensational incident. Many statements about the characteristics and needs of this population have been made, but until very recently, female offenders have been "empirically invisible." Only in the last few years have social science researchers begun to gather a systematic body of data on female offenders.

We recently conducted a study comparing samples of male and female offenders on the basis of their social and familial background, criminal history, and personal or emotional adjustment. Our goal is to see whether any of these factors can help to predict female recidivism and violence. In this article, we present some preliminary results of this research.

Not only is the available research on female offenders sparse, but much of it has been concerned with limited ranges of behaviour or narrow and unrepresentative subpopulations. Sociological investigations have primarily centred on the social structure of women's prisons and styles of adaptation to incarceration.⁽²⁾

Criminological studies have focused on such areas as gender differences in crime rates,⁽³⁾ court processing or sentencing.⁽⁴⁾

Often, other studies have had a limited focus. Studies of phenomena such as deviation from stereotypical gender roles,⁽⁵⁾ departure from a heterosexual orientation,⁽⁶⁾ allegedly abnormal physiological changes associated with normal reproductive biology,⁽⁷⁾ and physical characteristics thought to reflect masculinity⁽⁸⁾ represent, in various ways, a concern with deviation from stereotyped femininity.

Most investigations attempting to isolate factors causing criminality have been restricted to highly select groups of offenders. Often, earlier researchers selected prostitutes as the study group, and some explanations of female criminal behaviour have been based entirely on generalizations taken from data on prostitution.⁽⁹⁾

Thus, very little research has focused on the full spectrum of female criminality with anything approaching the range of variables of proven predictive value used for male offenders. For example, there is almost no information on factors associated with the origin or maintenance of female criminal behaviour, but there is a sizeable amount of such literature on male offenders. The method A review of the scarce published research on factors contributing to recidivism and violence among female offenders suggests that there might be both similarities⁽¹⁰⁾ and differences⁽¹¹⁾ between male and female populations. Therefore, we carried out a study that looked at both factors linked with future offences in men and factors that might differ with gender, in a female offender population. The study focused on criminal and violent behaviour (including self-injury and suicide), as well as other types of behaviour problems within an institutional setting.

Over an 18-month period, 100 adult female offenders participated in the study; all were imprisoned at the federal Prison for Women. The researchers reviewed institutional files to extract information such as

criminal history community and institutional involvement in mental-health treatment, previous suicide attempts and self-injuries, and various aspects of social, familial, educational, occupational and marital history.

A structured interview was used to measure variables such as psychopathy⁽¹²⁾ and coping efficacy,⁽¹³⁾ which have a demonstrated value in predicting subsequent (mis)behaviour in males.

A series of 12 questionnaires (including two developed specifically for this study) provided information on areas such as current emotional functioning and historical data. We also assessed the magnitude and nature of sexual and physical abuse in childhood, in adolescence and in adulthood; recent literature suggests that these variables may be powerful predictors of female recidivism and violence.⁽¹⁴⁾

Our aim was first to provide descriptive information on all of these factors and also to assess their usefulness in predicting a number of outcomes related to institutional and community behaviour, such as a woman's violence toward herself and others.

Although comprehensive data analyses are not yet ready for publication, we can now provide some interesting initial comparisons between the present sample and a random sample of male inmates included in an earlier study along similar lines.⁽¹⁵⁾ Measurements had been done longitudinally at several times for the male sample, but to maximize comparability we used the values measured about 1.5 years after the start of sentences.

It should be noted that the data on the women were taken about eight years after the data on the men, and the male data are outdated in some respects (for example, the racial distributions do not reflect those of current inmate populations). By design, the male data also included a low representation of sex offenders. However, the methods and measures of the two studies were similar enough that we can easily make comparisons. The breakdown by race for the female offenders was as follows: 74% were Caucasian, 12% were Aboriginal, and 14% were Black. In the male sample, 88% were Caucasian, 6% were Aboriginal, 4% were Black, and 2% were Asian.

On average, the women were 34 years old at the time of the study, and the men were 30 years old.

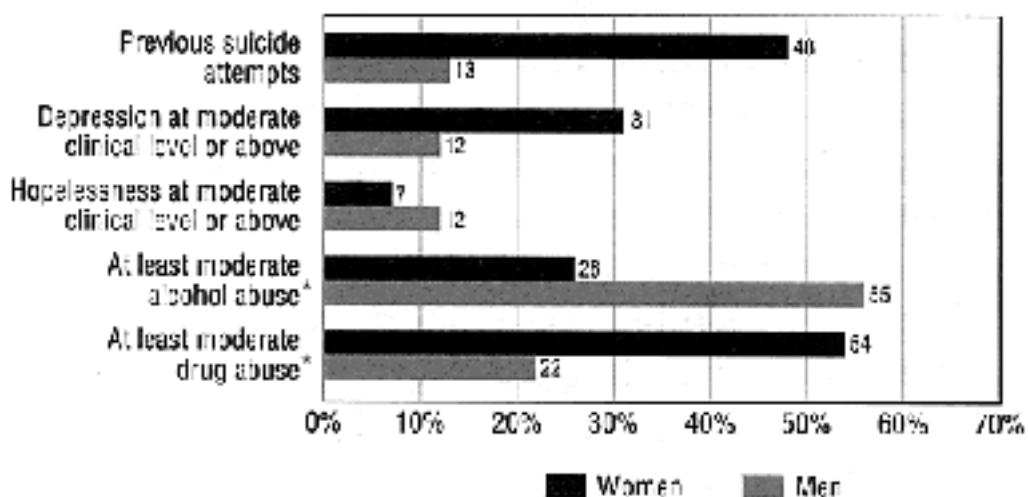
Most of the women in the sample (71%) had children, and one third were caring for young children at the time of their arrest. Figures are not available for the male sample. The results Social and familial background While these two samples were far from identical, there are obvious similarities. For example, both the men and the women seem to have had relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds: 15% of the women and 33% of the men grew up in poor families. However, the differences from national averages are hardly overwhelming, and these sample populations represent the full range of Canadian society.

A substantial proportion of both the men and the women spent the first years of their lives with adults other than their parents. From birth to age five, about 1 in 5 of the women and 1 in 10 of the men were living with adoptive parents, with foster parents or in an institution. Between the ages of 6 and 11, these proportions increased to about 1 in 4 for women and 1 in 5 for men.

Further, both male and female offenders showed evidence of difficulties in their personal histories. On average, they had dropped out of school early (at about age 16) and were poorly trained for employment. They also had high levels of unemployment and poor work histories. Half of the women were unskilled or unemployed, and another 30% were employed in a semiskilled trade or the equivalent. About one third of the men were unskilled or unemployed, and about half were employed in a semiskilled trade or the equivalent. Emotional factors and adjustment Similarly, there was evidence of emotional maladjustment, from substance abuse to suicide attempts. The measures of these characteristics are shown in Figure 1. Our assessment of their coping skills put these people in the range of "minimally effective." That is, they generally attempted to deal with problems but were very deficient in their ability to resolve them.

Figure 1

Emotional and Adjustment Factors



*Values for women are based on standardized questionnaires.
Values for men are estimated from data on consumption.

Criminal history We would expect such emotional difficulties to be associated with criminal behaviour, and certainly both women and men had histories of serious and repeated antisocial acts. Most had substantial criminal records starting about a decade before our studies (at age 22 or 21). On average, the women had 10.8 previous convictions, while the men had 12.6.

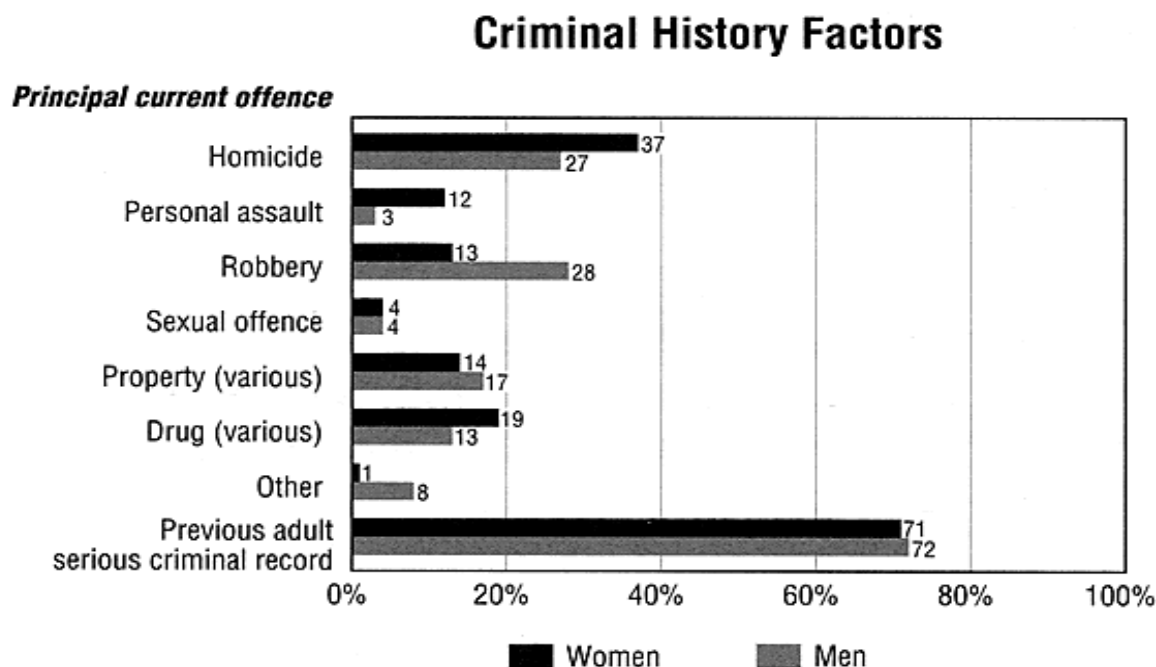
The women had served longer times on their current sentences (on average, 27 months for women compared with 16 months for men), and while this may affect some between-sex differences, the longitudinal study of the male sample showed relatively little change in most behaviours after a year or so in prison.¹⁶

Overall, there was no evidence that the crimes that resulted in penitentiary terms for women were any less serious than the offences of male penitentiary inmates. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of both populations by principal current offence. Discussion While the similarities are evident, there are also some very clear differences between the two groups of offenders. The women had much higher levels of

depression, and given the differences in the histories of suicide attempts, this probably had been the case for many years.

There are also some very interesting differences related to substance abuse. The women were only half as likely as the men to report at least moderate alcohol abuse and twice as likely to report at least moderate drug abuse.

Figure 2



There are also differences in the distribution of offences. Far more men were imprisoned for robbery; more women were imprisoned for non-fatal assaults.

Of course, these data are not representative of female offenders as a whole, because the sample population included only those convicted of the most serious crimes. However, the similarities between this group and the much larger group of serious male offenders are quite interesting, and the differences may give some clues to the determinants of offending for each group.

Analyses of these data are continuing, and we hope that further reports will be available soon.

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