

Research in Review

Gender Gap Trends for Violent Crimes, 1980 to 2003

Steffensmeier, D., Zhong, H., Ackerman, J., Schwartz, J., Agha, S. (2006). *Feminist Criminology*, 1(1), 72-98.

Over the past 25 years, arrest statistics have shown alarming changes in the profile of crimes committed by females. Ensuing debate has promoted a number of potential explanations for these changes, which primarily fall into two categories: changes in the *behavior* of females (e.g. increasing violent behavior by women, increasing stress and changing gender roles) and *policy* changes (e.g. changing arrest practices, broadening crime categories to include more minor crimes). The authors pause to dissect these distinct explanations.

Steffensmeier and colleagues suggest that an accurate understanding of the arrest statistics must look beyond the UCR (Uniform Crime Reports, the FBI's national arrest statistics) because arrest rates reflected in the UCR are a function of both changes in the occurrence of criminal acts and in rates of detection and punishment for these acts. As such, the UCR alone cannot be used to distinguish the root of the gender gap trends. Instead, the UCR must be used in conjunction with victimization data (National Crime Victimization Survey, NCVS) which provides an uncontaminated view of behavior change (because victim reports are not tainted by changing arrest practices or arrest categorization).

After viewing these two data bases through several different lenses, the authors offer a few observations:

1. Both the UCR and NCVS data have consistently demonstrated over the years that the rate of violent crime is much higher for males than it is for females. This overall pattern is not changing according to either source.
2. The type of violence matters – rates of the most serious types of violence (e.g. homicide, robbery) have not been rising among females. However, the rate of assault by females is rising according to the UCR but not according to the NCVS information.

Since both data sources show no change in the trends for serious violent offenses and victims' reports show little or no change in levels of assault by females, the authors support the view that the "cumulative effect of policy changes", not increasingly violent behavior by females, are the root of the changes in arrest statistics.



OJJDP has convened an interdisciplinary group of individuals to study issues related to girls' delinquency. More information can be found at <http://girlsstudygroup.rti.org>



Coordinating Center
University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
3811 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Phone: 412-647-4760
Fax: 412-647-4751

 Visit
our
website at
www.mac-adoldev-juvjustice.org

DATA COLLECTION *at a glance* (as of August 2006)

- 1,355 participants
- Over 17,900 interviews completed to date (subject, collateral and release interviews)
- All subjects have passed through their opportunity to complete the 36-month interview
- 30 subjects have died since the baseline (2%)
- 34 subjects have dropped out of the study since the baseline (2.5%)
- Subject retention rates for each time point (6-54 month) are averaging 91%
- As of the 36-month interview, 87% of the subjects have completed 5 or 6 of their six possible interviews
- Yearly collateral reports are present for about 85% of subjects



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on Pathways
to Desistance

Bad Girls

It is well established that boys engage in more delinquent and criminal acts than girls, with boys consistently involved in more aggressive and income-related offenses and girls more likely to be held for technical violations or status offenses (Farrington, Hollin, & McMurran, 2001; Sickmund, 2004). However, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program (UCR), between 1991 and 2000 the gender gap in offending shrank considerably, with girls becoming more frequent and possibly more aggressive in their offenses (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Some suggest that the closing of this gap is the result of net-widening policies rather than girls becoming more violent (Steffensmeier, Zhong, Ackerman, Schwartz, & Agha, 2006). Whatever the reason, delinquent girls, once considered a negligible fraction of the overall population of juvenile offenders, have become a significant presence in the juvenile justice system.

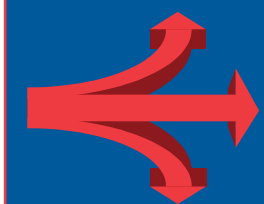
With this change comes the need to address more thoroughly a variety of gender differences in the etiology, manifestations, and treatment of delinquency. The Pathways to

Continued on page 2



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Bad Girls	1
Research in Review	5
Data Collection at a Glance	6



PATHWAYS PERSONNEL

COORDINATING CENTER:

Edward P. Mulvey, Ph.D.
Elizabeth Cauffman, Ph.D.
Carol Schubert, M.P.H.

University of Pittsburgh
Medical Center
3811 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
Phone: (412) 647-4760
Fax: (412) 647-4751

PHILADELPHIA SITE:

Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D.
Sonia Cota-Robles, J.D., Ph.D.

Temple University
Department of Psychology
Philadelphia, PA 19122
Phone: (215) 204-4470
Fax: (215) 204-1286

PHOENIX SITE:

Laurie Chassin, Ph.D.
George Knight, Ph.D.
Sandra Losoya, Ph.D.

Arizona State University
Department of Psychology
Box 871104
Tempe, AZ 87287
Phone: (480) 965-5505
Fax: (480) 727-7294

Delinquent Girls *Continued from page 1*

Desistance study is one of the first studies to follow serious female offenders from adolescence into adulthood. As such, the Pathways study is in a unique position to better understand the developmental course of female offending, by examining gender differences in delinquent behavior, historical exposure to traumatic events, mental health and substance abuse problems, and likelihood of assignment to various treatment approaches.

Gender Differences in Offending

Previous research suggests that boys and girls begin their antisocial behavior at about the same time (Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001). Our preliminary analyses, however, indicate that girls typically begin their criminal careers later than boys, at least in our sample of serious offenders. Specifically,

the first self-reported delinquent act typically occurs at 9 years of age for boys, whereas girls typically report their first act of delinquency at 10 years of age ($t = 5.12$, $p < .001$). This same pattern is observed when we review official court records; first petition to court occurs at 14.3

years of age among boys, compared with 14.9 years of age among girls ($t = 4.00$, $p < .001$). Boys also report more prior antisocial acts than girls (2.3 vs. 1.3 respectively; $t = 5.30$, $p < .001$). Over the three year follow-up period, 13% of boys reported no additional antisocial acts whereas 29% of the girls report no subsequent involvement. Among those youths who did report involvement in antisocial acts, boys did so at a higher rate than girls (see Figure 1).

Gender Differences in Exposure to Trauma

Previous research has found that exposure to traumatic events may be linked to delinquent behavior, and that delinquent acts may be a direct or indirect reflection of past victimization (Schwab-Stone et al., 1995). Findings from the Pathways study indicate that exposure to violence is exceptionally high in our sample, with 67% of youths reporting some type of direct victimization in the year prior to their initial interview.

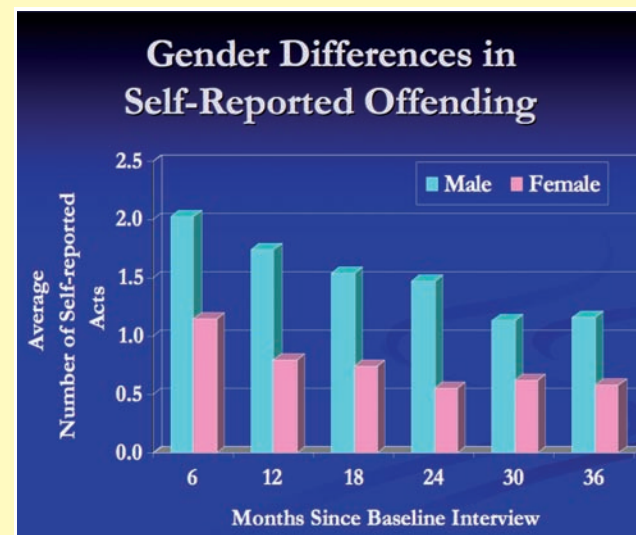


Figure 1

Interestingly, however, our findings indicate that boys (69%) are more likely than girls (55%) to be victims of violence, and that there are clear gender differences in the types of victimization experienced. Boys are more likely to be beaten up, attacked with a weapon, or shot at, whereas girls are more likely to be victims of rape. This victimization also continues in the same pattern over the three year follow-up period, as 78% of youth in the Pathways sample report some type of direct victimization, with boys (79%) again more likely to have been victimized than girls (71%; $z=2.33$, $p=.05$; see Figure 2). While there is mixed evidence on whether girls are more likely than boys to be exposed to trauma (compare for example, Kessler et al., 1995 with Dembo et al., 1993; Horowitz et al., 1995), studies have consistently found that among those who are exposed to trauma, girls are more likely than boys to develop mental health problems as a result (Breslau et al., 1991; Dembo et al., 1993; Horowitz et al., 1995; Kessler et al., 1995).

Gender Differences in Mental Health & Substance Use

A substantial body of research indicates that regardless of race and age, female offenders demonstrate higher rates of mental health problems than male offenders (Grisso et al., 2001; Espelage et al., 2003; Timmons-Mitchell et al., 1997) and that these problems continue into adulthood (Acoca, 1998; Teplin, et al., 2002). Specifically, girls, to a much greater extent than boys, tend to develop internalizing, rather than externalizing disorders (Ge, Conger, Lorenz, Shanahan, & Elder, 1995; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994;). Past research using the MAYSI-2 has found large gender differences in depression and anxiety with 54% of detained girls and 36% of detained boys meeting the cutoff on the scale that taps these constructs (Cauffman, 2004). Data from the Pathways study supports such findings, as girls in this study are more likely than boys to present with a DSM-IV diagnosis of an affective disorder

as well as PTSD (see Figure 3).

While it is not surprising that serious female offenders exhibit more internalizing behavior than serious male offenders, it is surprising to not find differences in substance use. Previous research with incarcerated youth suggests that half of

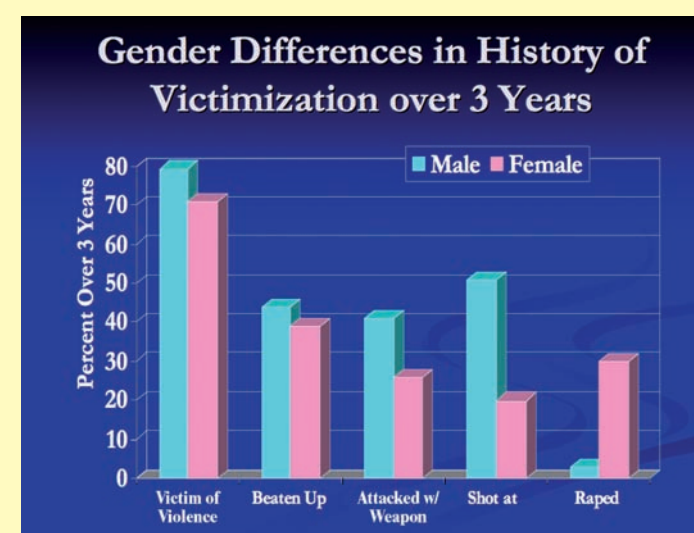


Figure 2

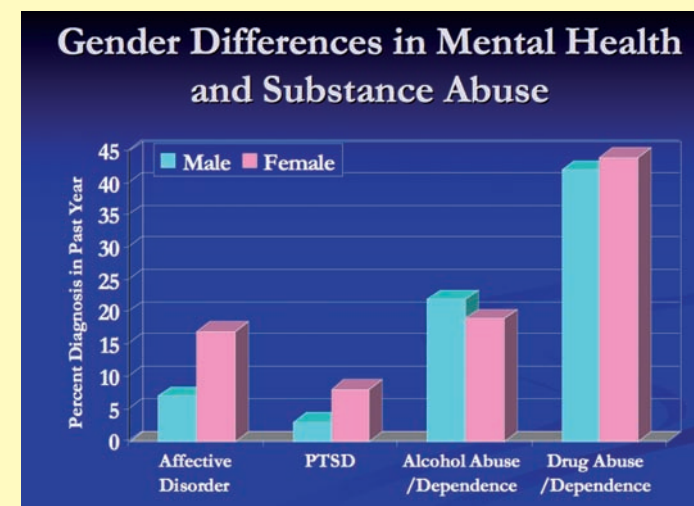


Figure 3

detained juveniles may have a diagnosable substance use disorder (Teplin et al., 2002). While the Pathways study observes rates somewhat lower (see Figure 3), we do not find the gender disparity in substance use disorders typically observed in the general adolescent population. Specifically, girls are just as likely as boys to present with an alcohol

abuse/dependence or drug abuse/dependence disorder. Previous research has found that the use of alcohol, marijuana and other illicit substances is associated with violence in girls in the general population (Blum, Ireland & Blum, 2003). In addition, girls who abuse alcohol are at higher risk for symptoms of depression and delinquent behaviors compared to boys who abuse alcohol (Windle, 1994). Such effects may explain the higher observed rates of substance use in our sample of female offenders.

Gender Differences in Assigned Treatment

In addition to identifying key gender differences in offending behavior, past traumatic experiences, and mental health symptoms, the Pathways study is also examining gender differences in treatment by the juvenile and adult court systems. Prior to adjudication, boys (16%)

are more likely than girls (7%) to be transferred to the adult court system. Moreover, over the three-year follow-up period, boys are more likely than girls to be placed in secure facilities (see Figure 4).

Girls, meanwhile, are more likely than boys to be placed in "other" placements such as foster homes, group homes, detox facilities, and psychiatric hospitals.

Such findings suggest that while arrest rates for girls are closing in on those for boys, disparities in treatment remain, with more punitive treatment more common for boys than for girls.

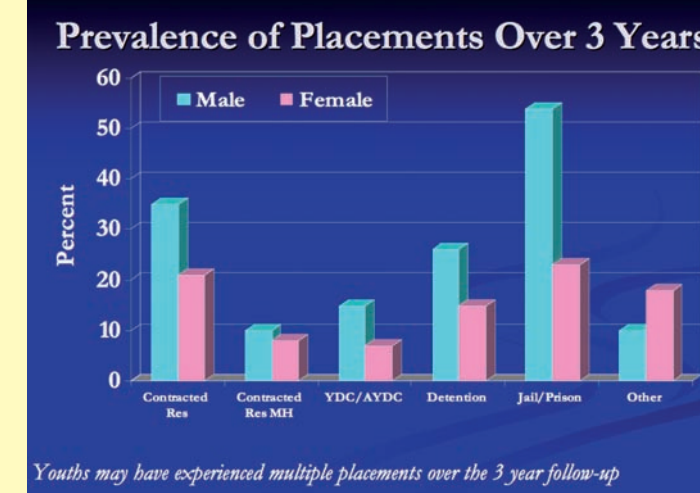


Figure 4

Conclusion

Serious female offenders differ from serious male offenders in a variety of ways. They tend to have shorter histories of offending, and are less likely to re-offend. They are less likely to have been victims of violence, but more likely to develop mental health problems as a result of such victimization. Female offenders are more likely to suffer from internalizing disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder than are male offenders. While substance use in community samples is typically higher among boys than girls, no such disparity is observed among serious offenders. Finally, female offenders tend to receive more lenient waiver and placement decisions than their male counterparts.

By improving our understanding of girls' delinquency trajectories from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood, and by examining the ways that risk and protective factors combine with treatment by the justice system to influence these trajectories, the Pathways study may ultimately provide a scientific foundation to guide policymakers and practitioners in the development of more effective, gender-appropriate interventions for serious offenders.

