

Women's Participation in Violent Street Crime

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The number of violent crimes reported during the first six months of 2013 indicates an overall decrease when viewed over the course of the last five years (Preliminary Uniform Crime Report, 2013). However, for the same five-year period the annual growth rate for incarcerated females has exceeded that of males (Glaze & Herberman, 2013). More significantly, 2011 data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that a higher percentage of females in state prisons are incarcerated for violent offenses than non-violent offenses (Carson & Sabol, 2012).

The Perspective of Criminology

Violent street crime is defined as a crime committed in an urban or metropolitan area that involves the use of force against a person such as robbery and assault (Frazier, 2013; Criminal Justice Information Services, 2013). In consideration of the number of females within the United States who are incarcerated for crimes related to assault, the commonly held assumption that violent street crime is predominately a male-oriented behavior is beginning to change (Stanford & Felthous, 2011; Chambers, Ward, Eccleston & Brown, 2011). However, current research activities have not yet reached a consensus as to why there has been an increase in the participation of females in violent crime (Nofziger, 2010). Researchers have, however, postulated numerous reasons for the rise in violent criminal behavior by females to include issues associated with a weak economy, an increase in the illegal drug trade and an overall decline in the neighborhood environment of many cities (Baskin & Sommers, 1998). These theories also include the belief that there is an increased likelihood of a female becoming involved in the commission of violent crimes when associating with individuals who were already participating in deviant or criminal behaviors (Becker & McCorkel, 2011; Chambers, Ward, Eccleston & Brown, 2011).

Developmental Criminology

Examination of the primary theories of criminology can provide an accurate explanation for criminal conduct in certain situations. However, in other cases, the same theory may not provide a rational explanation of a given criminal act. This consideration leads to the theory of developmental criminology which provides an alternative perspective to traditional approaches by incorporating perspectives from other theories such as differential association, social learning and social control (Piquero, Jennings & Barnes, 2012). This results in the belief that selected components of various criminological theories could be integrated into a single explanation that would account for women's participation in violent street crime. Accordingly, this explanation can be postulated by using considerations for learned behaviors and low levels of self-control.

Learned Behaviors. The concept of learned behaviors entails that an individual's participation in criminal activities stems from associating with other deviant individuals. Studies of this issue have also shown that an individual does not have to engage in violent behaviors to assimilate the concepts of violent crime and ultimately participate in the same type of behavior (Abbassi & Aslinia, 2010). This progressive nature of learned behaviors helps to explain why some adolescents tend to accept a deviant lifestyle that progresses to the commission of violent crimes (Ronel & Elisha, 2011). An additional consideration of learned behaviors is associated with the manner in which mass media and video gaming contribute to the imitation, desensitization, and reinforcement of violence on the part of some individuals (Krahé, Möller, Huesmann, Kirwil, Felber & Berger, 2011). Although the combination of these factors of learned behavior provides a general explanation for the participation of women in violent street crime, an alternative explanation can be attributed to a low level of self-control that exists within some individuals (Grattet, 2010).

Self-Control. The fundamental precept of self-control entails that individuals with a higher degree of self-control are capable of avoiding unacceptable behaviors even when associating with those who engage in criminal activity. The resolve to refrain from being influenced to participate in antisocial behaviors is further strengthened when an individual has a strong belief regarding the moral aspect of committing a deviant or criminal act (Cohen, Panter & Turan, 2012). In consideration that the foundation for learning the concept of self-control begins in adolescence, the influence and presence of parents and other responsible adults is critical if deviant behaviors are to be recognized and corrected (Trudeau, Mason, Randall, Spoth & Ralston, 2012). However, given the increasing change in the basic composition of the family unit as the result of divorces, marital separations, births out of wedlock, and single-parent families, many adolescents now have an increased amount of unsupervised time that puts them at risk of becoming involved in the commission of criminal acts (Siennick & Osgood, 2012).

The Connection of Learned Behavior and Self-Control Principles

The participation of women in violent crimes is considered by some criminologists to be more associated with the socialization practices that are involved in the development of individual personality traits (Nofziger, 2010). This belief provides a measure of support for the conclusion that participation by women in both violent and non-violent criminal activities can be directly influenced by their family and interaction with other individuals (Frisell Lichtenstein & Långström, 2011). With respect to self-control, research has identified that values associated with learned deviant behaviors can become so strong that it is often somewhat impossible for many individuals to deviate from a culture of criminal activity (Miller, 2013). Therefore, it becomes increasingly clear that an individual who has a low level of self-control would be more likely to succumb to negative influences and become an active participant in criminal activities.

However, concerning learned behaviors, one of the more significant findings is that women are prone to committing violence when associating with males rather than females (Becker & McCorkel, 2011). For this reason, many scholars have postulated that women who commit acts of violence do so, not in response to an escalation of tension and fear, but simply to perceived as being equal to male family members or other male peers (Henriksen & Miller, 2012).

Conclusion

Despite a commonly held belief that women generally avoid violence, their participation in violent crime appears to be more prevalent than previously believed. This not to imply that everyone who has a low level of self-control or associates with delinquents and criminals is predisposed to the commission of violent crimes. However, with respect to women's participation in violent street crime, there is little doubt that association with other deviant individuals by someone with a low level of self-control increases their propensity for involvement in violent street crimes. Other variables such as drug use, drug addiction, and victimization only serve to increase the odds of participation in acts of violence. The only question that then remains is whether an individual can resist the tendency to participate in violent street crimes or whether they succumb to peer pressure and life on the street.

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