The Nature of Female Offending:
Patterns and Explanation

Jennifer Schwartz and
Darrell Steffensmeier

In this chapter, the authors review the nature of female offending and advance a paradigm that builds on existing theory and work on gender. The authors begin by presenting an overview of patterns of female offending and the “gender gap” and contend that nowhere is the gender ratio more skewed than in the great disparity of males as offenders and females as victims of sexual and domestic abuse. The authors introduce a gendered paradigm for explaining female crime first sketched elsewhere and explain how gendered theory is different from gender-specific theories. The gendered paradigm is then used to illuminate more specifically the nature and context of female offending.

On one hand, the authors adopt the position that in spite of their androcentric origins, traditional structural and social process theories (even though they are based on studies of men) are relatively gender neutral and help explain female and male crime at a general level. On the other hand, the authors contend that many of the subtle and profound differences between female and male offending patterns may be better understood by a gendered approach that takes into account the continued profound differences between the lives of women and men that shape the different patterns of offending.

The authors highlight the fact that rather than equality between the sexes continues...
Female (and Male) Offending Patterns

There are both similarities and differences in patterns of offending by men and women. Both are more heavily involved in minor property and substance abuse offenses than in serious crimes like robbery or murder. However, men offend at higher rates—usually much higher—than women for all crime categories except prostitution. This gender gap in crime is greatest for serious crime and least for mild forms of lawbreaking such as minor property crimes.

Many sources provide data that permit comparison of male and female offending. We review FBI arrest statistics (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005) for males and females. Arrest statistics are comprehensive, covering 29 offenses, and uniformly available over time since 1960. But, arrest statistics reflect not only offender behavior but law enforcement actions as well, such as the willingness and ability of agents of the law to detect crime and make an arrest. We supplement the official Uniform Crime Report’s (UCR) portrait of female offending with offender information drawn from the National Crime Victimization Survey. We also draw upon findings from surveys on self-reported crime, from studies of criminal careers and delinquent gangs, and from case studies that provide a wealth of qualitative data on the differing contexts of male and female offending.

FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports

Table 2-1 summarizes a variety of information drawn from recent and past (2004, 1990, 1980, 1970, and 1960) male and female arrest data for all FBI offense categories except juvenile offenses (runaway and curfew): male and female arrests rates per 100,000 population (columns 5 and 10), the female percentage of arrests (column 15), and the offending profile of males and females (columns 17 and 19). All calculations in Table 2-1 adjust for the sex composition in the population as a whole and are based on all ages.

Arrest Levels

For both males and females, arrest rates are higher for less serious offenses. Female rates are highest for minor property crimes like larceny and fraud, for substance
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person crimes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicide</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felony assault</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple assault</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major property</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>428</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stolen property</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor property</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny-theft</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>895</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgery</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embezzlement</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malicious mischief</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto theft</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arson</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunkenness</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>35.9</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUI</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>1079</td>
<td>1286</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liquor laws</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug abuse</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>767</td>
<td>944</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-1: Male and female arrest rates/100,000 (all ages), female percentage of arrests, and male and female arrest profiles: 1960–2004 Uniform Crime Reports

© Jones and Bartlett Publishers. NOT FOR SALE OR DISTRIBUTION
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male rates</th>
<th>Female rates</th>
<th>Female percentage</th>
<th>Male Profile</th>
<th>Female Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female percentage</td>
<td>Male Profile</td>
<td>Female Profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex-Related</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex offenses</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorder conduct</td>
<td>745</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vagrancy</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicion</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against family</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambling</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other except traffic</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>1383</td>
<td>2273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
<td>782</td>
<td>1144</td>
<td>1286</td>
<td>1399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>1446</td>
<td>1668</td>
<td>1927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>All Offenses</td>
<td>6957</td>
<td>7701</td>
<td>7757</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1970–2004 columns do not add to 100% because runaways and curfew/loitering are omitted; in 1960, the UCR lumped arrests for these two juvenile-status offenses into “other except traffic.”

abuse (driving under the influence, or DUI; drugs; and liquor law violations), and, more recently, for simple assault. As we discuss later, the offense category of simple assault includes mostly minor, even trivial, incidents of threat or physical attack against another person such as scratching, biting, throwing objects, shoving, hitting, or kicking. Other data sources, reviewed later, attribute the recent ascent of simple assault mainly to police prioritization of minor incidents of violence. Arrest rates for prostitution-type offenses are comparatively smaller, a pattern that largely reflects nonenforcement police practices. Other data sources indicate that prostitution continues to be a chief form of female offending, especially on the part of drug-dependent women and women facing adverse economic circumstances.

**Arrest Profiles**

Both similarities and differences are evident in the profiles of male and female arrest patterns displayed in columns 17 and 19. These profiles reflect the percentage of total male and total female arrests represented by each crime category. The homicide figures of .10 for men in 2004 and less than .05 for women mean, respectively, that only about one-tenth of 1% of all male arrests were for homicide, and less than one-tenth of 1% of all female arrests were for homicide. In comparison, a whopping 28% of all male arrests and 27% of female arrests are “other-except-traffic”—a residual category that includes mostly criminal mischief, harassment, public disorder, local ordinance violations, and assorted minor crimes. For both males and females, the five most common arrest categories in 2004 are other-except-traffic, DUI, larceny-theft, drug abuse, and other assaults. Together, these five offenses account for 68% of all male arrests and 69% of all female arrests. Note, however, that after “other except traffic,” larceny arrests are the most numerous category (14% in 2004) for females; but that for males, drug abuse arrests are more important (13%). Arrests for murder, arson, and embezzlement are relatively rare for males and females alike.

The most important gender difference in arrest profiles is the proportionately greater female involvement in minor property crimes (collectively, about 21% of female arrests in 2004, compared to 10% of male arrests), and the relatively greater involvement of males in the more serious person or property crimes (9% of male arrests, but only 5% of female arrests).

**Female Percentage of Arrests**

The female share of arrests for most categories is 20% or less, and is typically smallest for the most serious offenses (column 15). Female representation in arrests is the largest for prostitution (including disorderly conduct and vagrancy statutes that are used in arresting females for prostitution) and for minor property crimes (larceny, fraud, forgery, and embezzlement). Females are heavily underrepresented in serious person and property crimes, such as homicide, rape, robbery, and burglary—only about 10% of arrestees for these offenses are female.
Recent Trends in Female Crime

The pattern of change in arrest rates since 1960 was similar for both sexes, with large increases occurring mainly for minor property offenses, driving under the influence (DUI), drug violations, and assaults (columns 1–10). Arrest rates of both women and men declined for public drunkenness, vagrancy, suspicion, and gambling. Since the mid-1990s, male declines have been quite marked so that 2004 male arrest rates for many offenses are comparable to or lower than those of the 1960s (e.g., homicide, rape, robbery, burglary) whereas female rates have leveled off (e.g., forgery, malicious mischief) or declined less precipitously (e.g., most person offenses, major property crimes, larceny-theft).

The distribution of arrest patterns has shifted a fair amount for both men and women over the past 40 years, but these changes are generally parallel (columns 16–19). Compared to 1960, there has been a shift toward arrests for minor violence and substance abuse offenses. For example, the percentage of total arrests accounted for by simple assault increased from 4% in 1960 to about 10% in 2004 for both women and men. The proportion of arrests for DUI, liquor laws, and drug abuse increased from about 7 or 8% to 23% for women and 29% for men. The offense profiles of women have shifted toward heavier involvement in minor property offenses (from 12% of offenses to 21%). The offense profiles of both men and women have shifted away from public order offenses—public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, vagrancy, suspicion, and gambling—a change largely related to shifting enforcement priorities. Arrest trends and shifts in offender profiles have generally been similar for men and women, but some notable gender differences exist.

The female percentage of arrests has tended to rise over the past two to three decades—most notably in the property crime categories (compare columns 11–15; also columns 1–10 for arrest rate trends), for simple assault, and for substance abuse offenses (except public drunkenness). When total arrests across all offenses are considered, the female percentage rose substantially—from 11% in 1960 to 23% in 2004. However, the bulk of that rise is due to the sharp increase in the numbers of women arrested for minor property crimes like larceny, fraud, and forgery. The female share of arrestees averaged about 15% in 1960 but over 40% for these crimes in 2004. The alcohol-related offenses of DUI and liquor law violations (mostly underage drinking) narrowed the gender gap as well—female representation in DUI increased from 6% to 18% and in liquor law violations from 13% to 25%.

Perhaps the most notable trend in recent years, though, has been the narrowing gender gap for assault crimes, with the female percentage averaging 12% in 1960 and 22% in 2004. Incremental increases began in the 1980s and heightened through the 1990s. In light of apparent increased female involvement in some offense types, it is important to note that for a number of other offenses,
the female percentage has held steady or declined slightly, including arrests for homicide and drug law violations.

Some criminologists have attributed increases in the female share of arrests for minor property crimes and, more recently, assault and drinking-related offenses to gains in gender equality and the women's movement. The media during the 1970s and even recently has enthusiastically embraced this interpretation of the "dark side" of female liberation. It is plausible to argue that greater freedom has resulted in more female participation in the public sphere (work, shopping, banking, driving, and the like), and could help account for some of the increases in the female share of arrests for minor property offenses like larceny (shoplifting, employee theft), fraud (misuse of credit cards), or forgery (writing bad checks). But do such behaviors as shopping, banking, or working in shops really reflect female emancipation?

More in-depth analysis shows that typical arrestees for these offense categories do not commit white-collar crimes but that these are petty offenses committed by economically marginal women (Daly, 1989; Steffensmeier, 1980, 1993). Likewise, women's assaults still tend to reflect relational concerns (see Chapter 5)—domestic strife, fights with other women over men, disputes with children—and tend to be minor in nature, inflicting less harm than men's assaults. The context of female assault incidents belies the claim that female violence is a product of changing gender roles toward female "masculinization." Rather than gender equality, a variety of alternative explanations provide more plausible and more parsimonious accounts for increases in the female percent of arrests.

Increased Economic Vulnerability for Many Women. Some feminists (and others) point to the peculiarity of considering "a hypothesis that assumed improving girls' and women's economic conditions would lead to an increase in female crime when almost all the existing criminological literature stresses the role played by discrimination and poverty (and unemployment or underemployment) in the creation of crime" (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992, p. 77; Daly, 1989; Miller, 1986; Richie, 1995; Steffensmeier, 1980).

Patriarchal power relations shape gender differences in crime (see also Chapter 6), pushing women into crime through victimization, role entrapment, economic marginality, and survival needs. Nowhere is the gender ratio more skewed than in the great disparity of males as offenders and females as victims of sexual and domestic abuse. Rather than equality between the sexes leading to more female crime, it is female inequality and economic vulnerability that are more likely to shape female offending patterns. For example, increases in property crimes among females is due not so much (if at all) to workforce gains nor are female gains in assault likely a product of changing gender roles. Rather, adverse economic pressures on women have been aggravated by heightened rates of divorce, illegitimacy, and female-headed households, coupled with greater responsibility for children.
The “liberated female crook” hypothesis also is undermined by the prevalence of traditional gender-role definitions among most male and female offenders (Bottcher, 1995). A few studies report a relationship between nontraditional or masculine gender-role attitudes and female delinquency on a given item but not on other items (Heimer, 1995; Shover et al., 1979; Simpson & Ellis, 1995). The bulk of studies, however, report that traditional rather than nontraditional views are associated with greater delinquency (see reviews in Pollock-Byrne, 1990; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1995).

Increased Opportunities for “Female” Types of Crime. The increased female percentage of arrests for (minor) property crimes reflects not only economic marginalization, but also an increase in opportunities for these crime categories (Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2004). Largely excluded from lucrative forms of crime (Steffensmeier, 1983), female increases in share of arrests for economically motivated crimes have come mainly in those categories that (1) require little or no criminal “skill”; (2) have expanded due to changes in merchandising and credit; and (3) are easily accessible to women in their roles as consumers and heads of families. Together, growing economic adversity among large subgroups of women has increased the pressure to commit consumer-based crimes such as shoplifting, check fraud, theft of services, and welfare fraud, crimes for which opportunities have expanded.

Trends in Female Drug Dependency. Rising levels of illicit drug use by females appear to have had a major impact on female crime trends, even though female drug arrests have not outpaced male arrests over the past several decades. Drug dependency amplifies income-generating crimes of both sexes, but more so for females because they face greater constraints against crime and need a greater motivational push to deviate (Anglin & Hser, 1987; Inciardi et al., 1993). Female involvement in burglary and robbery, in particular, typically occurs after addiction and is likely to be abandoned when drug use ceases (Anglin & Hser, 1987). Drug use is also more likely to initiate females into the underworld and criminal subcultures, expose them to potentially violent situations, and connect them to drug-dependent males who use them as crime accomplices or exploit them as “old ladies” to support their addiction (E. Miller, 1986; Pettiway, 1987; Steffensmeier & Terry, 1986). Increased economic insecurity among large subgroups of adolescent girls and adult women within the overall female population as well as several other factors—increased opportunities for “female” types of crime and trends in female drug dependency—help explain behavioral gains in the female percentage of arrests in some offense categories (e.g., larceny-theft, fraud, simple assault). However, official arrest statistics are not only a product of offender behavior but law enforcement activity as well. Expanded definitions of violence and crime utilized by law enforcement in response to public pressures have shaped upward
female arrest trends as much or more than changes in the position of women. The expanded scope of behaviors subject to arrest has widened the arrest net to disproportionately ensnare minor offenders—more typically women.

**Widening the Arrest Net Ensnares More Female Offenders**

A more important factor than women's changing position in society (i.e., toward liberation or increased economic marginalization) in shaping their arrest trends for violence and substance abuse is recent changes in law enforcement arrest practices and public policies defining the parameters for arrest. Women's arrest vulnerability has increased owing in part to the growing emphasis on the legal equality of the sexes, the curtailment of legal discretion and increased bureaucratization of policing, and an increased willingness on the part of victims or witnesses to perceive and report female suspects.

But an even greater contributor to recent female arrest trends is the more inclusive, expansive definitions of what constitutes "violence," an "assault," or "drunk driving" that have emerged in recent years (Blumstein & Wallman, 2000, p. 31). Recent enforcement practices have lowered the threshold of tolerance for low-level or misdemeanor violence, with officers now arresting less serious, less culpable offenders and those offending against intimates or in private settings (e.g., mandatory arrest for domestic violence; referral of in-school offenses to police). Likewise, drunk driving statutes have been revised to criminalize drivers with lower blood alcohol content (BAC) levels than in the past (i.e., 0.08% Legislation; Zero Tolerance).

The ability of authorities to dip more deeply into the pool of offenders elevates the female share of arrests because females are involved disproportionately in the less serious forms of lawbreaking even within a specific offense category. The gendered nature of offending—women's less serious, historically less visible offending—has intersected with more elastic, expanded definitions of offending to artificially increase women's arrest levels in comparison to men's. How the widening arrest net has disproportionately affected female arrest patterns is reflected in this quote from a veteran police officer:

> We [the police] bust people for assault a lot quicker today than we used to. Whole lot quicker. Especially women. If it's a domestic case involving a man and a woman, or one female fighting with another female over a boyfriend, chances are the lady will be arrested. Even if she is the one reporting a domestic violence situation but the guy claims that she threw things at him or scratched him bad, then we'd be inclined to arrest them both. Same with two ladies who get into a scuffle—one hits the other or pulls her hair, if there is a complaint, we'd arrest one or maybe both of them. Years ago, we didn't do that. Maybe charge disorderly or just give them a warning. Another example is "resisting arrest"—say it's a man or woman who is stopped for a traffic violation...
or whatever, maybe the person is drinking and hassles the officer, maybe there is some pushing or shoving. More and more times today, the officer will tack on an assault charge. On account of society being so uptight about violence, it’s a different ballgame today—you can get busted for assaulting someone, even aggravated assault, very easily. The same thing is happening in some other areas like driving while drinking—the surveillance and the amount needed to be “under the influence” has changed, so there are more arrests but is there really more drunk driving?

Other Evidence on the Nature of Female Offending

Several other sources of data are available to compare male and female offending patterns and trends. These sources estimate offending levels independent of the actions of agents of the criminal justice system and, therefore, are regarded by some criminologists as more accurate in their depictions of trends in crime than official data. Evidence from these other sources corroborates the relatively low female involvement in serious offending and the more gender-equal involvement in minor forms of offending. However, compared to arrest statistics, unofficial sources show more stability than change in the gender gap over the past several decades. In discussing discrepancies across sources of data, we focus primarily on trend differences for assault, because it is a high-profile issue and longitudinal data are more readily available for this offense.

Survey Data

Data from the National Crime Victim Survey (NCVS)—in which victims of personal crimes like robbery and assault are asked the sex of offender—reveal female-to-male totals that are quite close to those found in UCR data. Female participation is relatively greater in misdemeanor assaults and lesser in more serious violence (robbery, aggravated assault). Historically, the size of the gender gap in personal crimes has been similar across data sources.

The female percentage for felony assault in the early 1980s was about 12% to 13% in both the NCVS and the UCR (essentially no difference). However, in recent times, the gender gap for assaults has narrowed in arrest data but not at all according to victim-based estimates. The percentage of female involvement in felony assault, according to the NCVS, persists at about 11% to 12% but in the UCR it rises beginning after 1990 to 20%. Such is also the case for simple assault—general agreement across data sources until the early 1990s, when female representation in arrest statistics increases. The NCVS gender gap in simple assault is 16% in both 1980 and 2003 whereas female representation in arrest data rises from 13% to 24%. Figure 2-1 depicts the trends in the gender gap from 1980 to 2000; during the 1990s, the percentage of arrestees that are female rises whereas in victim-based reports the gender gap remains stable.
Self-report data, in which persons (typically juveniles) are asked to report on their own offenses, confirm the official pattern of a higher female share of offending for mild forms of lawbreaking and a much lower share for serious offenses (Canter, 1982; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). These results hold both for prevalence of offending (the percentage of the male and female samples that report any offending) and especially for the frequency of offending (the number of crimes an active offender commits in a given period). Gender differences are smallest for offenses such as shoplifting and minor drug use.

Self-report data, like victim-based offending estimates, depict a stable gender gap in assaults and drunk driving, in contrast to arrest statistics indicating that the gender gap is converging. The Monitoring the Future survey of youth shows a stable gender gap in minor assaults (35%) since 1980 (Steffensmeier & Allan, 2005). Figure 2-2 shows that girls’ and boys’ involvement in assault and the gender gap in assault have stayed essentially constant over the 1990s. Likewise, the Centers for Disease Control’s Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey on self-reported health risks shows an unchanging gender gap in drunk driving over the past fifteen or so years.

The narrowing gender gap in arrests for assault and drunk driving, unconfirmed by nonofficial sources of evidence, points heavily to gender-specific effects of a widened arrest net where broader offense definitions are making more women susceptible to arrest (Steffensmeier & Allan, 2005). The stability of the gender gap...
in the UCR for less variably defined measures of serious violence, such as homicide and robbery, also confirms gender-specific effects on arrest of changes in the operating definitions of assault, especially, as well as drunk driving.

Most women in prison today were convicted of homicide or assault (usually against a spouse, lover, or child) and increasingly in recent years for drug offenses or for property crimes that are often drug related. A much larger percentage of female new court commitments than of male new court commitments are entering prison today for a drug offense. Also, a higher percentage of female prison inmates than male inmates were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of the offense (Greenfeld & Minor-Harper, 1991). Statistics on males and females incarcerated in state and federal prisons reveal that from roughly the mid-1920s to the present, the female percentage of the total prison population varied between 3% and 7%. The female percentage was about 5% in the 1920s, 3% in the 1960s, 5% in the 1980s, 6% by the early 1990s and about 7% in 2005.

As with male incarceration rates, female rates have risen very sharply—more than tripled—over the past two decades. Notably, however, the gender gap trend in imprisonment for assault (and other violent offenses) has been stable since at least the mid-1980s, suggesting that less serious, less culpable, overcharged offenders—more typically women who might not have been arrested for assault in the past—are “pruned out” during later stages of case processing. Also, the female share of arrests for aggravated assault is almost three times the share of
women newly admitted to prison, suggesting that fewer females than males are imprisoned for assault during the sentencing stage when culpability, mitigating circumstances, and degree of harm are taken into account.

**Gang Studies**

Studies of gang participation indicate that girls have long been members of gangs (Thrasher, 1927), and some girls today continue to solve their problems of gender, race, and class through gang participation. At issue is not their presence, but the extent and form of their participation. Early studies, based on information from male gang informants, depicted female gang members as playing secondary roles as cheerleaders or camp followers, and ignored girls’ occasionally violent behavior.

Recent studies, which rely more on female gang informants, indicate that girls’ roles in gangs have been considerably more varied than early stereotypes would have it. Although female gang members continue to be dependent on male gangs, the girls’ status is determined as much or even more so by her female peers (Campbell, 1984). Also, relative to the past, girls in gangs appear to be fighting in more arenas and even using many of the same weapons as males, and the gang context may be an important source of initiating females into patterns of violent offending. The aggressive rhetoric of some female gang members notwithstanding, their actual behavior continues to display considerable deference to male gang members, avoidance of excessive violence, and adherence to traditional gender-scripted behaviors (Campbell, 1990; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Swart, 1991). Ganging is still a predominantly male phenomenon (roughly 85%). The most common form of female gang involvement has remained as auxiliaries or branches of male gangs (Miller, 1980; Swart, 1991), and females are excluded from most of the economic criminal activity (Bowker, 1980).

**Criminal Careers and Organized Crime**

Research on criminal careers—the longitudinal sequence of crimes committed by an individual offender—has become an increasing focus of criminology. The limited research comparing male and female criminal careers is limited mainly to violent career offenders and has found substantial gender variation (Denno, 1994; Kruttschnitt, 1994; Steffensmeier & Ulmer, 2005; Weiner, 1989):

1. Although violent offenses constitute only a small percentage of all the offenses committed by offenders in any population, females participate in substantially less violent crime than males during the course of their criminal careers.
2. The careers of violent females both begin and peak a little earlier than those of males.
3. Females are far less likely than males to repeat their violent offenses.
4. Females are far more likely to desist from further violence.
In brief, long-term involvement in crime—an extensive criminal career—is extremely rare within the female offender population. Case studies and interviews, even with serious female offenders, indicate weak commitment to criminal behavior (Arnold, 1989; Bottcher, 1995; Miller, 1986). This finding stands in sharp contrast to the commitment and self-identification with crime and the criminal lifestyle that is often found among male offenders (Sutherland, 1924; Prus & Sharper, 1977; Steffensmeier, 1986; Steffensmeier & Ulmer, 2005; Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1991). Case studies also show, for example, that the career paths of female teens that drift into criminality are typically a consequence of running away from sexual and physical abuse at home. The struggle to survive on the streets may then lead to other status offenses and crimes (Gilfus, 1992), including prostitution and drug dealing (English, 1993). Especially when drug abuse is involved, other criminal involvements are likely to escalate (Anglin & Hser, 1987; Inciardi, Lockwood, & Pottieger, 1993). Other researchers have chronicled how female vulnerability to male violence may drive women into illegal activities (Miller, 1986; Richie, 1995). Despite histories of victimization or economic hardship, many of these women display considerable innovation and independence in their “survival strategies” (Mann, 1984).

Finally, female involvement in professional and organized crime continues to lag far behind male involvement. Women are hugely underrepresented in traditionally male-dominated associations that engage in large-scale burglary, fencing operations, gambling enterprises, and racketeering. The 1990 report on organized crime and racketeering activities in the state of Pennsylvania during the 1980s revealed that only a handful of women were major players in large-scale gambling and racketeering, and their involvement was a direct spinoff of association with a male figure (i.e., the woman was a daughter, spouse, or sister). Moreover, the extent and character of women’s involvement were comparable to their involvement during the 1960s and 1970s (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1991).

Female crime is best characterized as less extensive than male involvement and tilted more heavily toward minor property crime and substance abuse offenses. Changes in arrest patterns have generally been similar for men and women, though female arrests for minor property offenses, and, more recently, simple assault and alcohol-related offenses have grown relative to men. Though increased female economic marginalization, expanded opportunities for “female” crime, and heavier substance abuse among women may contribute to some extent to increased female representation in arrest statistics, a more likely culprit is the widened arrest net aimed at low-level offenders; women’s relatively greater involvement in minor offending, as confirmed across all sources of data, has made them a more visible target of law enforcement in recent times.
Explaining Female Offending

Most theories of crime were developed by male criminologists to explain male crime. Recent decades have seen a lively debate concerning whether such theories are equally useful in explaining female crime, or whether female crime can only be explained by gender-specific theories.

Some criminologists argue that the “traditional” theories are in fact male-specific theories and therefore not well suited to the explanation of female crime. We take the position that, in spite of their androcentric origins, traditional structural and social process theories are more or less gender neutral. These theories are as useful in understanding overall female crime as they are in understanding overall male crime. They can also help explain why female crime rates are so much lower than male rates. However, we also contend that many of the subtle and profound differences between female and male offending patterns may be better understood by a gendered approach. To illustrate the underlying issues a bit more clearly, let us take a brief look at the so-called traditional theories and how they can be used to explain female crime and the gender gap in crime.

Approaches like anomie theory and conflict theory suggest that structural factors such as poverty and inequality, particularly in the face of societal emphasis on success/profits, underlie much of conventional crime. Consistent with these approaches, both male and female criminals come disproportionately from the ranks of the poor and disadvantaged. These approaches would explain the gender gap as a consequence of the lesser relevance of success/profit goals to women compared to men.

Social process approaches like differential association theory and labeling theory tend to explain conventional crime in terms of differential opportunities for the learning of criminal values and skills, or in terms of self-fulfilling prophecy effects of labels imposed by social control processes. Such theories would explain the gender gap as a consequence of lower access by females to criminal learning opportunities and/or the greater consistency between male stereotypes and negative behavioral labels.

Control theory argues that weak social bonds account for much crime. Consistent with this approach, both male and female delinquents and criminals come disproportionately from dysfunctional families, have lower levels of academic achievement, or exhibit other evidence of having weak stakes in conformity. The gender gap would be explained by greater female socialization toward bonding behavior.

The utility of the traditional theories is supported by evidence of considerable overlap in the causes of female and male crime. First, like males, female
offenders (especially those with frequent contact with criminal justice agencies) come from social backgrounds that disproportionately involve low income, poor education, and minority status (see reviews in Denno, 1994; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1995). The key difference is that female offenders are more likely to have dependent children.

Second, evidence that female rates respond to the same societal forces as male rates is also found in the close parallel between female rates and male rates across time, offense categories, social groupings, or geographic areas: female rates are high where male rates are high, and low where male rates are low (Schwartz, 2006; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1988; Steffensmeier et al., 1989; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000).

Third, both aggregate and self-report studies identify structural correlates that are similar for female and male crime, and causal factors identified by traditional theories of crime such as anomie, social control, and differential association appear equally applicable to female and male offending (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996; Schwartz, 2006). Measures of bonds, associations, learning, parental controls, perceptions of risk, and so forth have comparable effects across the genders.

While existing theories help understand female and male crime at a general level, they are less adept at explaining a number of persistent differences between female and male offending patterns. Compared to male offenders, females are far less likely to commit serious crimes (whether against persons or property) or to participate in or to lead criminal groups. When involved with others, women typically act as accomplices to males who both organize and lead the execution of crime; more organized and highly lucrative crimes are dominated overwhelmingly by males (Steffensmeier, 1983; Steffensmeier & Ulmer, 2005; Daly, 1989; Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1991).

Additionally, females are far more likely than males to be motivated by relational concerns and to require a higher level of provocation before turning to crime. Situational pressures such as threatened loss of valued relationships play a greater role in female offending. The saying “she did it all for love” is sometimes overplayed in reference to female offending, but the role of men in initiating women into crime—especially serious crime—is a consistent finding across research (Gilfus, 1992; E. Miller, 1986; Pettiway, 1987; Steffensmeier & Terry, 1986). Similarly, “doing crime for one’s kids or family” plays a greater role in female than male offending (Daly, 1994; E. Miller, 1986; Schwartz, forthcoming; Steffensmeier, 1983; Zeitz, 1981). Such findings also suggest that women are not necessarily less risk-oriented than men, but that women’s risk-taking is less prone to lawbreaking and more protective of relationships and emotional commitments.

Further, although many factors are as predictive of female as male offending, female offenders are more likely to have been victims of sexual abuse as
children or adults, and they are more likely to have had records of neurological and other biological or psychological abnormalities. Female felons nevertheless tend to be more conventional in other aspects of their life—more likely to have greater responsibilities for children, commitment to education or job training, legitimate sources of income, and so forth—and thus are more amenable to rehabilitation or reform (Daly, 1994; Steffensmeier, Kramer, & Streifel, 1993).

These and other differences in female and male offending patterns often involve subtle issues of context that are not well explained by other theories and that are nearly invisible to quantitative analysis. However, both traditional criminological literature and recent feminist analyses provide a wealth of qualitative data that illuminate such contextual issues.

Toward a Gendered Theory of Female Offending

A gendered theory (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1995, 1996) can advance our knowledge not only of female crime but of male crime as well (although this chapter focuses on female crime). A gendered theory is quite different from gender-specific theories that propose causal patterns for female crime that are distinctly different from theories of male crime.

Rather, both female and male crime may be better understood by taking into account the ways in which the continued profound differences between the lives of women and men shape the different patterns of female and male offending. The traditional theories shed little light on the specific ways in which gender differences in the type, frequency, and context of criminal behavior are shaped by differences in the lives of men and women.

Gender differences in crime may be better understood by taking into account gender differences in at least four key elements:

1. The organization of gender (differences in norms, moral development, social control, and relational concerns, as well as reproductive, sexual, and other physical differences).
2. Access to criminal opportunity (underworld sexism, differences in access to skills, crime associates, and settings).
3. Motivation for crime (differences in taste for risk, self-control, costs-benefits, stressful events, and relational concerns).
4. The context of offending (differences in the circumstances of particular offenses, such as setting, victim-offender relationship, use of weapons).

We elaborate on each of these four areas below. Figure 2-3 provides a graphic depiction of how these elements interact to mold gender differences in crime.
The Organization of Gender

We use the term “organization of gender” to refer broadly to many areas of social life that differ markedly by gender. Coupled with differences in physical and sexual characteristics, the organization of gender blunts the probability of crime on the part of women but increases that probability for men.

At least five areas of life tend not only to inhibit female crime and encourage male crime, but also to shape the patterns of female offending that do occur:

1. Gender norms
2. Moral development and relational concerns
3. Social control
4. Physical strength and aggression
5. Sexuality

These five areas overlap and mutually reinforce one another. They also condition gender differences in motivations, criminal opportunities, and contexts of offending.

Gender Norms

Female criminality is inhibited by two powerful focal concerns ascribed to women: (1) relational imperatives and the presumption of female nurturance;
and (2) expectations of female beauty and sexual virtue. Such focal concerns pose constraints on female opportunities for illicit endeavors. Women, much more than men, are rewarded for building and maintaining relationships and for nurturance of family, and the constraints posed by child-rearing responsibilities are obvious. Moreover, female identity often derives from that of the males in their lives. If those males are conventional, female deviance is restrained. However, derivative identity may also push females into the roles of accomplices of husbands or boyfriends with criminal involvements.

Femininity stereotypes are the antithesis of those qualities valued in the criminal subculture (Steffensmeier, 1986), and crime is almost always more destructive of life chances for females than for males. The cleavage between what is considered feminine and what is criminal is sharp—crime is almost always stigmatizing for females—whereas the dividing line between what is considered masculine and what is criminal is often thin. Whether women actually conform to femininity stereotypes is irrelevant. Male acceptance of such stereotypes limits female access to underworld opportunities by virtue of being subjected to greater supervision by conventional parents and husbands as well as by criminal devaluation of females as potential colleagues.

Female internalization of the same stereotypes heightens fear of sexual victimization and reduces female exposure to criminal opportunity through avoidance of bars, nighttime streets, and other crime-likely locations (McCarthy & Hagan, 1992; Steffensmeier, 1983). Expectations of female sexuality also shape the deviant roles available to women, such as sexual media or service roles.

**Moral Development and Amenability to Affiliation**

Compared to men, women are more likely to refrain from crime due to concern for others. This may result from gender differences in moral development (Gilligan, 1982) and from socialization toward greater empathy, sensitivity to the needs of others, and fear of separation from loved ones. From an early age, females are encouraged to cultivate interpersonal skills that will prepare them for their roles as wives and mothers (Beutel & Marini, 1995; Brody, 1985; Rossi, 1984).

This predisposition toward an “ethic of care” restrains women from violence and other behavior that may injure others or cause emotional hurt to those they love. Such complex concerns also influence the patterns and contexts of crime when women do offend. Shoplifting, fraud, and other minor property crimes that females engage in do not have a visible victim and are viewed by offenders as being relatively harmless (e.g., large stores can absorb the financial losses from shoplifting).

Men, in contrast, are more socialized toward status-seeking behavior. When they feel those efforts are blocked, they may develop an amoral ethic in which the ends justify the means. The likelihood of aggressive criminality is especially heightened among men who have been marginalized from the world of work, but
such individuals may be found in the suites as well as on the streets. Their view of the world becomes one in which “people are at each other's throats increasingly in a game of life that has no moral rules” (Messerschmidt, 1986, p. 66).

**Social Control**

The ability and willingness of women to commit crime is powerfully constrained by social control. Particularly during their formative years, females are more closely supervised and their misbehavior discouraged through negative sanctions. Risk-taking behavior that is rewarded among boys is censured among girls. Girls' associates are more carefully monitored, reducing the potential for influence by delinquent peers (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986), while attachments to conventional peers and adults are nurtured. Even as adults, women find their freedom to explore worldly temptations constricted (Collins, 1992).

**Physical Strength and Aggression**

The weakness of women relative to men—whether real or perceived—puts them at a disadvantage in a criminal underworld that puts a premium on physical power and violence. Muscle and physical prowess are functional not only for committing crimes, but also for protection, contract enforcement, and recruitment and management of reliable associations.

Females may be perceived by themselves or by others as lacking the violent potential for successful completion of certain types of crime, or for protection of a major “score.” This can help account for the less serious and less frequent nature of female crime. Female criminals sometimes deliberately restrict themselves to hustling small amounts of money in order not to attract predators. Perceived vulnerability can also help explain female offending patterns such as women's greater restriction to roles as solo players, or to dependent roles as subordinate accomplices, as in the exigencies of prostitute-pimp dependency (James, 1977).

**Sexuality**

Reproductive-sexual differences, coupled with the traditional “double standard,” contribute to higher male rates of sexual deviance and infidelity. They also reinforce the gender differences in social control described above. In contrast, the demand for illicit sex creates opportunities for women for criminal gain through prostitution and other quasi-legitimate sexual activities (e.g., sexual role as decoy). This in turn may reduce the need for women to seek financial returns through serious property crimes that remain a disproportionately male realm.

At the same time that male stereotypes of female sexuality open certain criminal opportunities for women, within criminal groups these same stereotypes close opportunities for women that are not organized around female attributes. The sexual tensions that may be aroused by the presence of a woman
in a criminal group may force her to protect herself through sexual alignment with one man, becoming “his woman.” Despite our reference to prostitution as a criminal opportunity that women may exploit, it is of course a criminal enterprise that is controlled by men. Pimps, clients, police, and businessmen who employ prostitutes all control in various ways the working conditions of prostitutes, and virtually all are men.

**Access to Criminal Opportunity**

All the above factors contrive to limit female access to criminal opportunity and to shape the patterns of female crime. Limits on female access to legitimate opportunities put further constraints on their criminal opportunities, because women are less likely to hold jobs such as truck driver, dockworker, or carpenter that would provide opportunities for theft, drug dealing, fencing, and other illegal activities. In contrast, abundant opportunities exist for women to commit and/or to be caught and arrested for petty forms of theft and fraud, for low-level drug dealing, and sex-for-sale offenses.

Like the upperworld, the underworld has its glass ceiling. The scarcity of women in the top ranks of business and politics limits their chance for involvement in price fixing conspiracies, financial fraud, and corruption. If anything, women face even greater occupational segregation in underworld crime groups—whether syndicates or more loosely structured organizations (Steffensmeier, 1983; Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1991; Steffensmeier & Ulmer, 2005). Just as in the legitimate world, women face discrimination at every stage from selection and recruitment to opportunities for mentoring, skill development, and, especially, rewards.

**Motivation**

The same factors that restrict criminal opportunities for women also limit the subjective willingness of women to engage in crime. Gender norms, social control, lack of strength, and moral and relational concerns all contribute to gender differences in criminal motivation: tastes for risk, likelihood of shame, level of self-control, and assessment of costs and benefits of crime.

Although motivation is different from opportunity, opportunity can amplify motivation. Being able tends to make one more willing. The opposite is also true. Female as well as male offenders tend to be drawn to those criminal activities that are easy, within their skill repertoire, a good payoff, and low risk.

Women have risk-taking preferences and styles that differ from those of men (Hagan, 1989; Steffensmeier, 1980; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1995). Men will take risks in order to build status or gain competitive advantage, while women may take greater risks to protect loved ones or to sustain relationships. Overall level of criminal motivation is suppressed in women by their greater ability to foresee
threats to life chances and by the relative unavailability of female criminal type scripts that could channel their behavior.

**Context of Offending**

Female and male offending patterns differ profoundly in their contexts. “Context” refers to the circumstances and characteristics of a particular criminal act (Triplett & Myers, 1995), such as the setting, presence of other offenders, the relationship between offender and victim, the offender’s role in initiating and committing the offense, weapon (if any), the level of injury or property loss/destruction, and purpose of the offense. Even when the same offense is charged, the “gestalt” of offending is often dramatically different for females and males (Daly, 1994; Steffensmeier, 1983). Moreover, female/male contextual differences increase with the seriousness of the offense.

Spousal murders provide a striking example of the importance of context. The proposition that wives have as great a potential for violence as husbands has had some currency among criminologists (Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988; Straus & Gelles, 1990). Although in recent years husbands have only constituted about one-fourth of spousal victims, the female share of offending has approached one-half in earlier decades. But, as Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, and Daly (1992) observe, the context of spousal violence differs dramatically for wives and husbands. Wives are far more likely to have been victims and turn to murder only when in mortal fear, after exhausting alternatives. Husbands who murder wives, however, have rarely been in fear for their lives. Rather, they are more likely to be motivated by rage at suspected infidelity, and the murder often culminates a period of prolonged abuse of their wives. Some patterns of wife killing are almost never found when wives kill husbands: murder-suicides, family massacres, and stalking.

Another area where female prevalence often approximates that of males is in common forms of delinquency such as simple theft or assault. Here again we find important contextual differences: girls are far less likely to use a weapon or intend serious injury (Kruttschnitt, 1994), to steal things they cannot use (Cohen, 1966), to break into buildings, or steal from building sites (Mawby, 1980). Similarly, with traditional male crimes like burglary and robbery, females are less likely to be solitary (Decker, Wright, Redfern, & Smith, 1993), more likely to be an accomplice, and less likely to share equally in the rewards (Steffensmeier & Terry, 1986). Females more often engage in burglaries that are unplanned, in residences where they have been before as a maid or friend but where no one is at home (Steffensmeier, 1986). Women involved in robbery often capitalize on their sexuality to accomplish the crime—robbing clients in the sex trade, acting as a “decoy” with a male partner, or appearing sexually available (Miller, 1998)—rather than by physical might.
Utility of the Gendered Perspective

The real test of any approach is in its ability to predict and explain female (and male) offending patterns as well as gender differences in crime. In general, the perspective correctly predicts that female participation is: highest for those crimes that are most consistent with traditional gender norms and for which females have greater opportunity; and lowest for those crimes that diverge the most from traditional norms and for which females have little opportunity. The potential contributions of this gendered approach can be illustrated with examples of property, violent, and public order offending patterns.

Among property crimes, offenses that are consistent with the traditional female roles of family shopping include shoplifting, misuse of credit cards, and bad checks—categories (larceny, fraud, forgery) for which the percentage of female arrests is very high. The pink-collar ghetto—the high concentration (90%) of women in low-level bank teller and bookkeeping positions—helps account for the high female percentage of arrests for embezzlement. Embezzlement arrests are less likely to occur among higher-level accountants or auditors, groups in which women are less represented in employment (less than half). The perspective also correctly predicts gender differences in motives for embezzlement: women tend to embezzle to protect their families or relationships, while men are more often trying to protect their status (Zeitz, 1981).

A gendered approach also correctly predicts the low level of female involvement in serious property crimes, whether on the “streets” or in the “suites” (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1995). Such crimes are most at odds with female stereotypes and/or present few opportunities for female participation. When women do engage in such crimes, the “take” is likely to be small, or they are acting as accomplices (as is the case with female burglaries, described above). Solo robberies by women typically involve small sums, such as “wallet-sized” thefts by prostitutes or addicts (James, 1977; see also Covington, 1985; Pettway, 1987). As accomplices, female roles in robberies often simultaneously exploit their sexuality (e.g., as decoys) and reinforce male domination (E. Miller, 1986; J. Miller, 1998; Steffensmeier & Terry, 1986).

Lack of opportunity helps explain the negligible female involvement in serious white-collar crime (Daly, 1989; Steffensmeier, 1983). Female representation in high-level finance, corporate leadership, and politics is simply too limited to provide much chance for women to become involved in insider trading, price-fixing, restraint of trade, toxic waste dumping, fraudulent product production, bribery, official corruption, or large-scale governmental crimes such as the Iran-Contra affair or the Greylord scandal. In lower-level occupations, even where women have the criminal opportunities, they are less likely to commit crime.
Female violence is also shaped by the organization of gender. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, female violence remains relatively rare and female motivations continue to be driven by relational concerns and defense of sexual virtue. For example, representative cases of girls arrested for simple assault include: female-on-female fight in retaliation for spreading rumors about her sexual virtue; female-on-male incident to stop sexual harassment (lifting her skirt); mother and daughter fight over the girl breaking her curfew; and female-on-female assault for talking to a girl’s boyfriend. Our discussion above of gender differences in spousal murders also provides an example of how our gendered approach can advance the understanding of female violence. Female violence is less likely to be directed at strangers, and female murders of strangers or even casual acquaintances are rare. Victims of women are likely to be either a male intimate or a child. Furthermore, violent women are likely to commit their offenses within the home against a drunk victim, and they frequently cite self-defense or depression as their motive (Dobash et al., 1992). Women appear to require greater provocation to reach the point they are willing to commit murder.

In the area of public order offenses, the gendered paradigm can predict with considerable accuracy those categories with a high percentage of female involvement, particularly prostitution and juvenile runaways, the only categories in which the rate of female arrests exceeds that of males. These are easily accounted for by gender differences in the marketability of sexual services and the patriarchal double standard. For example, customers must greatly outnumber prostitutes, yet they are less likely to be sanctioned. Similarly, concerns about sexual involvement increase the probability of arrest for female runaways, even though self-report data show that actual male runaway rates are just as high (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992).

The organization of gender also shapes gender differences in substance abuse. The importance of relational concerns is reflected in the fact that women are often introduced to drugs by husbands or boyfriends (Inciardi, Lockwood, & Pottieger, 1993; Pettiway, 1987). Female abuse patterns reflect less integration into drug subcultures or the underworld (Department of Health and Human Services, 1984). Because women are typically less likely to have other criminal involvements before addiction, the crime amplification effects are greater in terms of being driven to theft or other income-generating crimes by the need for money to purchase drugs. As the paradigm would predict, female addict crimes are likely to be nonviolent (Anglin & Hser, 1987).

Although we have concentrated on demonstrating the utility of a gendered paradigm in explaining female crime, it can do the same for male crime. For example, violence draws on and affirms masculinity, just as prostitution draws on and affirms femininity. For both men and women, “doing gender” can direct criminal behavior into scripted paths (although for women it more often preempts criminal involvement altogether).
The gendered paradigm is also useful for understanding current trends in male and female offending, including female increases in minor property offending as well as the discrepancy in female violence trends across data sources that we have identified. Women's crime has expanded most in areas of offending that are minor, are nonconfrontational, and involve legitimate or domestic skills and little physical strength, such as larceny-theft, fraud, and forgery. The visibility of minor forms of female violence has increased, but, based on multiple sources of evidence, it is doubtful that this is a result of changes in the aggressive nature of women or gender norms governing violent behavior. Rather, evidence suggests that authorities are increasingly targeting offending contexts more typical of women—minor acts of aggression that take place in private settings. Recent changes in law enforcement policy that widen the arrest net to incorporate more minor forms of criminal behavior will artificially elevate female arrest levels, given the differing contexts of female and male offending as shaped by the organization of gender.

As both women and men move increasingly into nontraditional roles, it will be difficult to predict the impact on levels and types of criminal involvement. Because traditional female stereotypes appear to constrain most women from crime, some have been tempted to predict that female crime rates would increase to the level of male crime rates as women's roles become more like those of men. However, entrapment in traditional roles may actually increase the likelihood of criminal involvement for some women. For example, it is wives playing traditional roles in patriarchal relationships who appear to be at greatest risk, not just for victimization but also for committing spousal homicide or engaging in self-defense or retaliatory violence against a domestic abuser. Similarly, emotionally dependent women are more easily persuaded by criminal men to “do it all for love.”

Conclusion

Our knowledge about fundamental issues in the study of gender and crime has expanded greatly with the proliferation of studies over the past several decades, although significant gaps still exist. Our coverage of patterns and etiology of female offending has necessarily been selective and cursory. We conclude by restating and expanding on some key points.

Women are far less likely to be involved in serious crime, regardless of data source, level of involvement, or measure of participation. The girls and women who make up the bulk of the criminal justice workload involving the female offender (and are the grist of female offender programs) commit ordinary crimes—mostly minor thefts and frauds, low-level drug dealing, prostitution, and simple assaults against their mates or children. They are likely to have at
least one adult conviction for theft, prostitution, or drug/alcohol involvement but seldom return to further crime commission afterward. However, some of them commit crime over several years and serve multiple jail or prison terms in the process. But they are not career criminals.

Often the lives of many of these women are intertwined with those of men who are persistent thieves or, in other ways, are “losers.” Along with their children, for these women, these men are the principal focus of their lives. The world of these men tends to be an extremely patriarchal one in which women are relegated to subordinate roles. Exploited or treated with indifference by their male partners, the women lead lives that are often miserable and difficult. Routinely, it is they who are left to cope with the consequences of men’s unsuccessful escapades and the incarceration these can bring.

Despite some shifts in attitudes toward greater acceptance of women working and combining career and family, the two major focal concerns of women, beauty and sexual virtue and nurturant role obligations, persist. For example, though increasingly represented in the labor force, women continue to be concentrated in traditional “pink-collar” (teaching, clerical and retail sales work, nursing, and other subordinate and “help-mate”) roles that reflect a persistence of traditional gender roles. In fact, the number of occupations that are filled largely or exclusively by women—nearly always at lower salaries than “male” occupations—has actually increased in recent years.

There has been little change over the past several decades in: gender-typing in children’s play activities and play groups (Fagot & Leinbach, 1983; Stoneman et al., 1984; Maccoby, 1985); the kinds of personality characteristics that both men and women associate with each sex (Simmons & Blyth, 1987); the importance placed on the physical attractiveness of women and their pressure to conform to an ideal of beauty or femininity; risk-taking preferences and value orientations toward competition versus cooperation, and so forth (Beutel & Marini, 1995).

The most significant evidence, perhaps, that core elements of gender roles and relationships have changed little is the continuing dominance of women as “caretakers”—for the sick, elderly parents, children, and so forth. At the group level, women today are more responsible for child rearing than two or three decades ago. The “degendering” of family roles—in which fathers and mothers share breadwinning and caregiving roles equally—has not gone smoothly. Men have increased their participation in child care over the past 30 years, but the amount of change has been small (Coltrane, 1995; Amato, 1998). A more significant trend is the rise in single-mother households (due to increases in divorce and nonmarital birth) that has reduced the amount of time that men spend living with children over the life course (Eggebeen & Uhlenberg, 1985). Furthermore, many nonresident fathers see their children infrequently and pay no
child support or less than they should (Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Furstenberg, 1988). A recent review of the research in the area concludes: “Increasingly, American children are being raised with little or no assistance from fathers. These changes in behavior and family structure have led to a contradictory situation. At a time when some men are becoming more involved with children, men (as a group) are spending less time with children than ever before” (Amato, 1998, p. 2).

A growing body of historical research indicates that the gender differences in quality and quantity of crime described here closely parallel those that have prevailed since at least the thirteenth century (Beattie, 1975; Hanawalt, 1979). Even where variability does exist across time, the evidence suggests that changes in the female percentage of offending (1) are limited mainly to minor property crimes or mild forms of delinquency (Hagan, 1989; Steffensmeier, 1980, 1993); and (2) are due to structural changes other than more equalitarian gender roles such as shifts in economic marginality of women, expanded availability of female-type crime opportunities, and, especially, net-widening changes in the formality of social control mechanisms applied to female types of crimes (Beattie, 1995; Steffensmeier, Schwartz et al., 2005). The considerable stability in the gender gap for offending can be explained in part by historical durability of the organization of gender and by underlying physical and sexual differences (whether actual or perceived). Human groups, for all their cultural variation, follow basic human forms.

The gendered perspective that we offered has implications both for understanding the nature of female offending and for developing female offender programs. Both theory and programmatic approaches to female offenders should include at least three key elements. The first is the need to take into account how the organization of gender deters or shapes delinquency by females but encourages it by males. We use the term “organization of gender” to refer broadly to gendered-norms, identities, arrangements, institutions, and relations by which human sexual dichotomy is transformed into something physically and socially different.

The second is the need to address not only gender differences in type and frequency of crime but also differences in the context of offending. Even when men and women commit the same statutory offense, the “gestalt” of their offending is frequently quite different (Daly, 1994). The differing gestalt of female offending (and its link to the organization of gender) was reviewed earlier but is further reflected in this comment from an ex-female offender who now works in a drug treatment program for “serious” female offenders:

A lot of what is called “serious” crime that is committed by women is hardly that. The other day two women were referred because they were busted for armed robbery. What happened is, they were shoplifting and had a guy as a partner. The security person spotted them and confronted them as they is
[sic] leaving the store. This causes the guy partner to spray the security man with mace. They all get away but not before the security man gets the license number of the van they is driving. They all gets arrested—not for shoplifting now but for armed robbery on account of the mace.

What female robbery there is, is because a guy has them be a distraction or the watcher. Or it's a prostitute who maybe steals from a john, or it's a woman so heavy into dope that she crosses the line. I did a couple of robberies when I was heavy into drugs but it was not my thing. Selling dope, shoplifting, and prostitution were my main activities. This goes for most of the women I've known who get involved in crime on account of having to support themselves or their kids or some sponge [male] they is hooked up with. (personal communication)

Finally, theory and programmatic approaches to female offending need to address several key ways in which women's routes to crime (especially serious crime) may differ from those of men. Building on the work of Daly (1994) and Steffensmeier (1983, 1993), such differences include:

1. The more blurred boundaries between victim and victimization in women's than men's case histories;
2. Women's exclusion from the most lucrative crime opportunities;
3. Women's ability to exploit sex as an illegal money-making service;
4. Consequences (real or anticipated) of motherhood and child care;
5. The centrality of greater relational concerns among women, and the manner in which these both shape and allow women to be pulled into criminal involvements by men in their lives;
6. The frequent need of these women for protection from predatory or exploitative males.

In sum, recent theory and research on female offending have added greatly to our understanding of how the lives of delinquent girls and women continue to be powerfully influenced by gender-related conditions of life. Profound sensitivity to these conditions is the bedrock for preventive and remedial programs aimed at female offenders.
Schwartz and Steffensmeier adopt the position that, in spite of their androcentric origins, traditional structural and social process theories are more or less gender neutral, and, therefore, are as useful in understanding female crime as they are in understanding overall male crime. They expound on the underlying issues for this rationale. Following an overview of patterns of female offending and what they call the gender “gap,” they present a gendered paradigm to illustrate more specifically the nature and context of adult female offending. The authors contend that many of the subtle and profound differences between female and male offending patterns may be better understood by a gendered approach. According to the authors, “the gendered perspective correctly predicts that female participation is: highest for those crimes that are most consistent with traditional gender norms and for which females have greater opportunity; and lowest for those crimes that diverge the most from traditional norms and for which females have little opportunity.”

This chapter, along with the chapter on delinquent girls that precedes it, provides an accurate representation of women offenders and delinquent girls, respectively. Both chapters provide a useful foundation and a realistic understanding not only of the female offender herself but of the current patterns and trends in female crime and delinquency—a necessary first step to treating them effectively.
REFERENCES


