

The Pathways Perspective: Women's Pathways Into Crime

Research on women's pathways into crime indicates that gender matters significantly in shaping criminality. The profound differences between the lives of women and men shape their patterns of criminal offending. Among women, the most common pathways to crime are based on survival (of abuse and poverty) and sub-stance abuse. The "pathways perspective" incorporates a whole-life perspective in the study of crime causation. The pathways research has used extensive interviews with women to uncover the life events that place girls and women at risk of criminal offending. Other studies use pre-sentence investigative reports and official records. These diverse data collection strategies have allowed researchers to sequence the life events that shape women's choices and behaviors.

Research on female offenders has established conclusively that women enter the criminal justice system in ways different from those of male offenders. The following differences have been empirically documented:

- The roles of violence, trauma, and sub-stance abuse in criminal pathways.
- Offense and re-offense patterns.
- The impact of responsibilities for children and other dependent family members, and reduced ability to support self and children.
- Race and ethnicity and the impacts of these in terms of crime, violent partners, and substance abuse.
- Connections with violent and substance-abusing partners.

Recent work on the totality of women's lives has established that because of gender, women are at greater risk of experiencing sexual abuse, sexual assault, and domestic violence. They are also more likely than men to have the responsibility of caring for children. The pathways research has identified the following key issues in producing and sustaining female criminality.

Histories of Personal Abuse. Empirical research has established that female offenders have histories of sexual and/or physical abuse that appear to be major roots of subsequent delinquency, addiction, and criminality. Abusive families and battering relationships are also strong themes in the lives of female offenders. Frequently, women have their first encounters with the justice system as juveniles who have run away from home to escape situations involving violence and sexual or physical abuse. Prostitution, property crime, and drug use can become a way of life for these individuals.

Mental Illness and Substance Abuse. Stephanie Covington discusses the ways in which emotional disconnections contribute to criminal pathways. Many women suffer from some form of mental illness or co-occurring disorder. Nearly 8 in 10 female offenders with a mental illness reported having experienced prior physical or sexual abuse. The link between female criminality and drug use has been found to be very strong; research indicates that women who use drugs are more likely to be involved in crime. Approximately 80 percent of women in state prisons have substance abuse problems, and about 50 percent of female offenders in state prisons had been using alcohol, drugs, or both at the time of their offense. Nearly one in three women serving time in state prisons reports having committed the offense to obtain money to support a drug habit. About half describe themselves as daily users.

Economic and Social Marginality. Many women on the social and economic margins struggle to survive outside legitimate enterprises, which brings them into contact with the criminal justice system. Economic marginalization, often shaped by disconnections from conventional institutions, such as school, work, and families, further increases the likelihood of criminal behavior. A significant proportion of women in the criminal justice system have little education or work experience and significant histories of personal abuse.

Homelessness. A result of severed social relations, economic vulnerability, addiction, and abuse, homelessness is a frequent complication in the lives of women involved in the criminal justice system. Homeless women are far more likely than their male counterparts to have young children in their care and to be more dependent on public assistance. These women (23 percent) are also more likely than men (4 percent) to be victims of sexual abuse.

Relationships. Another gender difference found in studies of female offenders is the importance of relationships, with criminal involvement often having come about through relationships with family members and significant others. Women are often first introduced to drugs by partners who frequently continue to be their suppliers. Women's attempts to get off drugs, and their failure to supply partners with drugs through prostitution, often elicit violence from the partners; however, many women remain attached to partners despite neglect and abuse. Research using the pathways perspective continues to add to the portrait of female offending:

- For young African-American girls from poor families, law breaking often represents a resistance to victimization. These girls experience a structural dislocation from family, education, and legitimate occupations. Thus, sustained criminal involvement may become a rational coping strategy.
- Research identifies five significant factors in women's pathways to imprisonment: the multiplicity of abuse; early family life; children; the street life; and spiraling marginality.

In identifying the specific events and contexts of women's lives that promote criminal behavior, the pathways perspective has made significant contributions to our understanding of women's criminality. This perspective appears to be most promising in terms of providing an empirical framework for the development of gender-responsive principles, policy, and practice in the criminal justice system.

--Excerpt from Gender Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice, and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders; by Barbara Bloom, Barbara Owen and Stephanie Covington; published the National Institute of Corrections; July 2003