

Gender Differences in Crime

Recent research shows a marked difference in the way brothers and sisters responded to similar risk factors for offending. **Kate Painter and David Farrington** summarise the findings.

Criminology is notoriously gender-blind and this is particularly the case when it comes to explaining discrepancies in offending between males and females. Most research on risk factors for offending have been based on males because they are more likely to offend than females and male offending is more serious, persistent and violent (Lanctot and LeBlanc, 2002). Despite the clear discrepancy in offending, there is a paucity of high quality, large scale, community-based research that satisfactorily explains whether the risk factors that influence male offending are similar to or different from those that influence female offending. A notable exception to this is a sophisticated longitudinal study which makes comparisons between males and females with regard to risk factors (Moffitt *et al.*, 2001).

A recent research paper (Farrington and Painter 2004) draws together the key findings on research on whether the risk factors for offending (measured by convictions) differ for males and females and it compares the criminal careers of males and females in the same families. The focus is on three types of risk factors: socio-economic, family and child-rearing. The source of data is the brothers and sisters of the males in the *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development*. This is a longitudinal survey of the development of offending in 411 males who were first contacted in 1961-1962 in south London. The research examined how effective risk factors were in predicting the offending of the 494 brothers and 519 sisters

child being convicted increased with the number of other convicted children in a family.

Overall, the most important risk factors for offending were similar for brothers and sisters (low family income, large family size, attending a high delinquency school, having a convicted parent, a delinquent sibling, parental conflict, separation from a parent, harsh or erratic discipline and poor parental supervision). However, gender differences were apparent. Factors predicting offending more strongly for sisters were socio-economic (low social class, low family income, poor housing) and child-rearing factors (low praise by parents, harsh/erratic discipline, poor parental supervision, parental conflict and low parental interest in education and in the children). Factors predicting offending more strongly for brothers were parental risk factors (depressed/anxious and poorly educated parents). Convicted parents were equally important predictors for brother and sisters but there was no tendency for mother risk factors to be more important for sisters and father risk factors for brothers.

There were also gender differences in predictive accuracy. In fact, risk factors were better predictors of offending by sisters than by brothers, even after controlling for other factors. For example, for early onset offending, depending on the absence or presence of low family income, the percentage of sisters convicted increased from 1% to 11%, whereas the percentage for brothers increased from 14% to 33%. While the absolute percentage difference was greater for brothers, the proportional

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from the 397 families in the study. An advantage of this approach is that by comparing boys and girls in the same families, many other influences on offending such those of neighbourhood and community are controlled. The limitations of the project are that the boys and girls were growing up during the 1960s and 1970s in very different conditions from today, and that offending is measured according to convictions.

Criminal careers and risk factors

With regard to criminal careers, the prevalence of convictions was much higher for brothers (44%) than for sisters (12%) and the type of offence varied between brothers and sisters. Brothers were more likely than sisters to commit burglary (20% vs. 6%) and theft of vehicles (13% vs. 4%). Sisters were more likely than brothers to commit shoplifting (28% vs. 6%) and deception offences (27% vs. 12%). Although brothers and sisters were similar in average ages of offending and in average ages of onset and desistance, sisters had shorter criminal careers (4.4 years compared with 6.6 years for brothers). Moreover, offending was concentrated in certain families and the probability of a

increase (which is a better index of likely causal effect) was much greater for sisters.

Equally, risk scores predicted offending more strongly for sisters than brothers. Five variables (low family income, large family size, convicted parent, separation from a parent and poor parental supervision) were used to create a risk score. Each factor was given a weight of one and risk scores were calculated according to how many of the five variables were present for each brother and sister. Thus, in predicting early onset offending, the percentage of sisters convicted increased from 2% of those with no risk factors to 21% of those with 4-5 factors. For boys the increase was from 9% of those with no risk factors to 40% of those with 4-5 risk factors.

In terms of risk assessment, the fact that convicted sisters were a smaller fraction of the cohort (12%) and therefore a more extreme and distinctive group than convicted brothers (44%) accounted for part of the gender difference in predictive accuracy, but not for all of it. The 63 convicted sisters were compared with the 66 brothers who had a total of four or more convictions ('frequent' offenders). There remained marked gender differences in the predictability of different risk factors. Socio-



same adverse social and economic circumstances as their male counterparts, women are less likely to offend than males, why they do not commit violent, predatory acts to the same extent as men or why, when they do offend, they have shorter criminal careers.

This project did not provide answers to these age-old problems but it does highlight the need for new theories about gender differences in offending which might help explain the results. Existing theories do not predict that socio-economic and child-rearing factors are more important for females, that parental characteristics are more important for males and that criminal parents are equally important for both males and females. Arguably, empirical testing of new theories should be undertaken, using a longitudinal survey. Hitherto, information about gender differences in offending has been very limited but it is hoped that the insights gained about the issue from this study will help in implementing more effective gender-specific intervention techniques to reduce offending.

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economic and child-rearing factors were still more important for sisters and parental factors were still more important for brothers. This suggests that risk assessment using family factors is likely to be more accurate for females than for males. Moreover, this research suggests that risk assessment devices can predict more effectively among females than among males and these two findings have important implications for risk-focused prevention.

A need for new theories

The present analyses suggest that parent training and education techniques, which target parental discipline, supervision, praise of and interest in children are likely to have proportionally more impact in reducing female offending. Nonetheless, the total number of offences reduced is likely to be greater for males than for females due to the higher prevalence of male offending.

Criminology may be regarded as a 'soft' scientific discipline but it has been harsh on women. For the most part they have been ignored and neglected or presented in stereotypical terms as 'whores', 'witches' and manipulative liars (Smart 1976). Small wonder that we remain unable to explain why, given the

References

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