

Unpacking Crime over the Life Course: Causes of Offending in a High Risk Sample of Women¹

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have consistently identified a direct relationship between childhood victimization and adult offending. Less is known about how this early victimization operates together with later life experiences to influence offending and substance use in adulthood. In this research, we first examine the independent effects of recent negative life experiences (exposure to severe stress, dangerous neighborhood conditions, interpersonal conflict, victimization) and childhood victimization on adult offending and drug use. We then assess whether drug use serves as a link between stressful and traumatic life experiences and other types of offending. These questions are addressed using data from a multi-site study called the Women's Experiences with Violence Project, which examines the personal, situational, and community-level factors that are associated with women's violent offending and victimization. We find that both recent negative experiences and childhood victimization are associated with increased offending and drug use in adulthood. Moreover, there is evidence that drug use mediates both the long- and short-term effects of strain on non-violent offending. This work highlights the need for researchers to study the causes of offending within the context of personal histories and to recognize that the effects of childhood experiences can carry over into adulthood.

Introduction

Traditionally, the study of crime has been synonymous with the study of men. However in the last thirty years, there has been a growing interest in understanding female offending. The work I am presenting today explores this issue by examining how women's life experiences, both as children and adults, shape their involvement in criminal behavior and drug use. We are particularly interested in the influence of traumatic and stressful experiences, like victimization.

In the United States over the last 30 years the number of women involved in the criminal justice system has surged. From 1980 to 2011, the number of women in prison increased almost 600 percent (Phillips, 2012) and in 2012, over 200,000 women were incarcerated (Carson and Golinelli, 2013). While the number of men in prison also increased dramatically during this period, the increase for women is nearly 1.5 times that for men (637% versus 419%) (Phillips, 2012).

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Research indicates that two themes figure prominently into the lives of crime-involved women.

The first theme is victimization. Almost half of female offenders in the United States reported that they had been the victim of physical or sexual abuse, a higher rate of victimization than observed in the general population (Ekstrand, 1999). Like female offenders, male offenders have high rates of childhood victimization (Widom, 1989; Widom and Maxfield, 2001), but there is some evidence that physical and sexual abuse may be particularly salient for females who commit crime. For example, girls are more likely to link their delinquent behavior to childhood abuse than boys (Belknap and Holsinger, 2006).

A second defining factor of female offenders in the United States is their high rates of drug use. Approximately 60 percent of women in state prisons and jails reported using drugs in the month prior to their arrest and approximately half reported using drugs on a daily basis (Greenfeld and Snell, 1999). While substance abuse is prevalent among all offenders, women incarcerated in state prisons report higher levels of use compared to their male counterparts, regardless of how drug use is measured (Greenfeld and Snell, 1999). Improving outcomes for women offenders begins by targeting their history of victimization and drug use. But to do so, we need to understand the mechanisms through which these factors interact to influence offending.

The purpose of this study is to examine how women's experiences in childhood and adulthood interact to influence their levels and patterns of offending and drug use. We divide these experiences into two categories based on when they occurred. First we examine the carryover effects of early childhood experiences, which we call distal factors. Given the high rates of abuse reported by female offenders, we focus on childhood victimization. However, adult experiences also matter; even serious offenders do not spend all their time engaging in crime. Much offending is intermittent and current life circumstances influence whether a woman is offending at a particular time in her life. We call these recent circumstances that influence movement into and out of offending proximal causes and they can include things like periods of unemployment or living with a male partner. Unlike distal factors, which are expected to have an enduring effect on problem behavior, the effects of proximal factors are immediate and short-lived. In this work, the proximal factors we focus on include short-term changes in exposure to stressful life experiences (including negative life events, victimization, interpersonal conflict, and living in unsafe neighborhoods). Finally, we also explore whether drug use serves as a link between stressful and traumatic life experiences and other types of offending. Before I describe this research, it is important to discuss why we think victimization and stressful life experiences should affect offending and drug use.

The link between women's victimization in childhood and their adult offending has been explained by the pathways perspective. The pathways perspective describes the various developmental processes through which the negative consequences of abuse accumulate over time (Brennan et al., 2012; Daly, 1994; Simpson, Yahner, and Dugan, 2008). In one path, the link between childhood victimization and adult offending is alienation from parents and the support they provide. Girls who are abused are more likely to run away from their homes at an early age. These girls develop mental health problems like depression, and they use drugs to help them deal with these issues. In adulthood, they support themselves and their drug habit through offending. Other women end up offending in adulthood because childhood victimization causes them to have difficulty controlling their emotions and behavior. These girls respond to the abuse by acting out in school and engaging in delinquency. Over time, they develop an aggressive demeanor which eventually leads to offending.

While the pathways perspective focuses on the enduring impact of childhood victimization, other theories, like General Strain Theory (GST), are concerned with the more immediate effects of negative life experiences. The essence of GST is that when individuals experience strain, which is defined as being treated in an unjust manner, it generates negative emotions (Agnew, 1992). Some people cope with these negative emotions using illicit means. For example, the victim of violence may feel anger or fear and they may try to get rid of these negative emotions by using drugs or retaliating against their attacker. One main difference between GST and the pathways perspective is that GST tends to focus on the immediate impact of stressors. For example, GST would predict that women should be more likely to offend and use drugs in months when they experience strain (Slocum, Simpson, and Smith, 2005). Not all strains are equally likely to result in offending. Strains that are the most criminogenic tend to be severe, chronic, and clustered together in time and include things like violent victimization, chronic interpersonal conflict, and living in unsafe neighborhood (Agnew 1992, 2001).

Drawing on these two perspectives, this research explores several interrelated questions.

First, as hypothesized by the pathways perspective, are women who were victimized in childhood more likely to offend and use drugs compared to those who were not victimized? Second, in accordance with GST, during months in which a woman is exposed to stressors, is she more likely to offend or use drugs relative to months when she is not exposed to stressors? Finally, what is the role of substance use in explaining the link between victimization/other stressful life experiences and offending?

METHODS / DATA

We address these questions with survey data collected from a diverse sample of female inmates who were interviewed in the United States and Canada. These interviews were conducted as part of the Women's Experiences with Violence (WEV) project, which uses mixed-methods to document the neighborhood, personal, and situational contingencies surrounding women's violent victimization and offending. The survey covered a wide range of topics including the women's background and early life experiences such as victimization in childhood. We also collected data on women's recent life experiences. These data were gathered using a life event calendar, which was used to collect information on each of the 36 months before the respondents' current incarceration period (see Morris and Slocum, 2010). We asked about monthly changes in life circumstances like living arrangements and employment. We also asked them to report month-to-month changes in offending, substance use, neighborhood conditions and severe stressors. In addition, women were asked to identify the months in which they experienced violent victimization or serious interpersonal conflicts. These data allow us to examine the short-term interplay between stressful life experiences that occurred early and later in life and offending over time.

SAMPLE

In this study we used data from 695 incarcerated or jailed women who collectively provided information about more than 20,000 months of their lives immediately prior to their confinement. They had been charged with a wide variety of offenses, but the predominant charges were related to drugs or alcohol. Although we cannot generalize our findings to all women, or even all incarcerated women, our data allows us to explore the interplay between child abuse, recent stressors and offending for female offenders. This could not be done with a sample taken from the general population due to low base rates.

The sample is racially diverse. 46% of the women self-identified as black, 40% as white, and 10% as Native American, while the remaining 4% identified themselves as some other race or ethnicity. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 62 and the women were on average 34 years of age.

VARIABLES

We studied women's monthly involvement in three types of illegal behavior. Violent offending includes things like robbery and physical attacks. Non-violent offending is comprised of behaviors like theft and drug dealing. Finally, regular drug use measures whether the respondent reported that she used serious drugs on at least a weekly basis. The women reported engaging in violence in approximately 6 percent of their months on the street (5.6%). As expected, the women in our sample were far more likely to engage in non-violent crime, than to use violence. The women reporting engaging in non-violent crime in half of the months in which they were on the street (50%), most commonly involvement in the drug trade (31% of street-months), followed by property crime (18% of street-months) and prostitution (15% of street-months). Regular, serious drug use is equally as prevalent (46% of street-months).

We include measures of three different types of childhood victimization: Sexual, physical and psychological. Sexual victimization was the least prevalent: 25 percent of the sample reported experiencing some form of sexual victimization before 6th grade. Physical and psychological aggression was more common, occurring in 33 percent and 40 percent of the sample, respectively.

And finally, we have four measures that capture women's exposure to recent stressors. Our first measure captures the number of different stressful life experiences the respondents reported in a given month. Our second variable measures unsafe neighborhood conditions. This is a three item scale with higher values indicating the respondent perceived her community as more dangerous. We include measures of victimization and interpersonal conflict because they are considered to be particularly criminogenic. Victimization is a count of the number of times the respondent reported being the victim of violence in the month. However, not all serious interpersonal conflict results in violence, so we also capture near violence, or incidents in which the respondent thought violence was likely to occur, but for some reason it did not.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We analyze our data using multilevel analysis. This technique allow us to simultaneously examine differences in offending between women and as well as how a woman's level of offending changes over time. In our models, we control for a wide-range of variables that have been linked to offending including, race, age, employment, and participation in treatment.

Our first set of analyses explored the carryover effects of childhood victimization on adult offending. We find that victimization in childhood exerts a significant influence on offending even in adulthood. The long-term negative effects of sexual abuse are especially pervasive; women who were sexually victimized were more likely to engage in all three types of illegal behaviors that we studied. Additional analyses indicated that the relationship between sexual abuse and non-violent offending is explained by drug use. This suggests women who were abused in childhood are more likely to use drugs in adulthood. In turn they engage in nonviolent crime, like drug dealing, in order to fund their drug habit. We also found that women who were exposed to more severe physical abuse were more likely to engage in violence. Psychological abuse has no effect on any of the types of offending we looked at.

Next we explored whether short-term changes in exposure to stressors are related to women's movement in and out of offending. We find that recent life experience also matter. Women are more likely to offend and use drugs in months when they experience stressors, but certain stressors are related to certain types of offending. For example, violence is related only to negative life events, while property crime is more likely when women live in unsafe neighborhoods and experience repeated interpersonal conflict. Drug use is linked to all three of these types of stressors. Once again, we see that drug use mediates the relationship between two types of stressors (stressful life experiences, interpersonal conflict) and offending, suggesting that the women in our sample are likely to cope with stress by using drugs and the money to buy drugs is obtained through illegal means.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with our expectations, our study shows that the deleterious consequences of childhood victimization—especially sexual victimization—carry over into adulthood. This form of abuse was associated with higher levels of both violent and non-violent offending and substance use. The results suggest that, consistent with a pathways perspective, sexual abuse creates long term mental health issues and women may self-medicate with drugs. In turn drugs create an economic imperative that leads women to engage in nonviolent crime, like theft, prostitution, and drug dealing, to fund their habit. The effect of sexual victimization on violence, however, cannot be explained by drug use. The mechanism linking this form of victimization to violence in adulthood is likely the inability to regulate emotions and reactions to stress (Daly's harmed and harming pathway, 1994) or deficient social processing such as a bias toward attributing hostile intentions to others (Dodge, Bates, and Pettit, 1990).

We also found that women who were physically victimized in childhood were more violent as adults, but this form of abuse was not related to other types of offending. This suggests that the effects of physical abuse may operate through a different pathway than sexual victimization, such early aggressive behavior or alcohol use (Widom, Schuck, and White, 2006).

Above and beyond childhood experiences, exposure to stressors in adulthood can account for women moving in and out crime. Once again, drug use plays a central role in explaining short-term changes in offending. Drug use is related to the widest variety of stressors. Moreover it mediates the effect of stress on non-violent offending.

These results suggest that programs that seek to reduce women's offending should address their early victimization experiences. Ideally, childhood victimization should be identified early and youth should receive help in dealing with the negative consequences of this experience. In addition, teaching women pro-social strategies for managing the stressors they encounter in their daily lives, including interpersonal conflict, may also help to reduce their involvement in drug use and offending. Coping skills training has been identified as a successful strategy for reducing the likelihood an inmate will re-offend after release (Lipsey and Wilson, 1998). These coping skills could be behavioral, cognitive, or emotional in nature (Agnew, 1992). For example, female inmates could be taught problem solving skills that would help them to take prosocial actions directed at reducing the source of their stress. This form of behavioral coping has generally been found to be effective at reducing negative emotions that might lead to crime.

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