

WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last few years, women who have committed violent offences have come to the forefront of media and policy attention. Several high profile murders and violent assaults by women have caused a sensationalised vision of the new “violent woman.” To no avail, feminist and liberal theorists, patriarchy and biological theories have attempted to explain the increase in women’s violent crime rates.

The risk factors associated with women’s violent behaviour are no different than those associated with men’s violent behaviour. Unemployment and poverty, violence within the family, substance abuse, peer influence and psychological factors are equally valid predictors of violence, regardless of race or gender. However, it has been indicated that in certain circumstances, women’s reasons for committing violence are unique to those of men. For example, women will more often use violence when it is economically motivated, to survive abuse or for revenge.

There is strong evidence that social and justice responses to women’s violent crime are the primary contributor to increased violent crime rates. In recent years, the definition of assault has broadened to include verbal threats and intimidation. This means more women are labelled aggressive today than in the past. Victim reporting has increased and amended police charging policies deny police the discretion they once had in not laying charges against women. The increased number of charges laid against women have created massive statistical increases in women’s violent crime rates. As a result, there is an unrealistic perception in society that women who act violently are a risk to public safety. As well, zero tolerance policies are being used by justice personnel in courts across Canada, resulting in greater numbers of women incarcerated than were previously.

The current social and justice responses to women’s violent crime contribute to the perception that women are more violent. However, there is no evidence to support that women’s increased participation in violent crime is inherent or that it is even common. What is evident, are the lack of social programs, particularly treatment programs and rehabilitation, for women dealing with physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse and mental health issues. Although such programs have been implemented into federal women’s correctional facilities across the country, to have them accessible in communities, could help to prevent women from being incarcerated in the first place.

It is the responsibility of society not to further fear and alienate women who act violently, but to be aware of the factors that lead to violent behaviour. Social policy developers must identify these risk factors and develop programs to prevent and intervene before violence occurs.

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INTRODUCTION

Are women committing more violent crime? Research done on women and violence has revealed a small body of work that has provided crucial information on a much under studied topic. Female offenders have recently come to the forefront of media and policy attention because of the suggestion that female violence in Canada has increased. Sensationalised images of extremely violent and uncontrollable women have emerged primarily because of several high profile murders and violent assaults by women.

Researchers have detected certain risk factors that contribute to women's involvement in violent crime, including unemployment/poverty, family violence, substance abuse, peer and psychological factors. These risk factors are not the sole contributor to the increase in women's crime and the perceived increase in women's violent offences. There are a number of reasons why women's involvement in the criminal justice system is increasing, including increased victim reporting and police charging practices, broadened definitions of assault, zero tolerance policies by provincial and federal governments and misinterpreted statistics. There is a lack of social and community programming available to women and men who are at high risk for violent offending. This lack of programming is further ignored, as citizens across the country shift their focus to this new "violent woman," and away from the reasons that cause them to lash out.

OVER THE YEARS: WOMEN AND CRIMINALITY

Over the centuries, females who deviated from expected and traditional roles were viewed as morally corrupt, hysterical, diseased, manipulative and devious (Simpson, 1989, p. 605). Throughout Canadian history, women have not been exempt from committing crime, including violent offenses. The first documented execution of a women offender in Canada was in 1640 when a 16 year old female was found guilty of theft. She was hanged by a male offender who escaped execution himself by agreeing to act as a hangman for the young woman (University of Regina, 2000, p. 1). In 1773, Josephthe Corrieaue killed her husband and was hung in an iron cage until death, as warning to other wives contemplating the murder of their husbands (Anderson, 1996, p. 2). The last documented execution of a woman offender was Marguerite Pitre in 1954, who was hanged to death for murder on the Canadian gallows (Anderson, 1996, p. 1).

Female crimes have traditionally consisted of theft, fraud, drug offences, forgery, embezzlement and prostitution. Despite the reality of female offence patterns, the media and public prefer to focus on the "glitzy exceptions" that suggest women's involvement in crimes of violence are increasing (Merlo & Pollack, 1995, p. 119). In 1997, the media focussed on the assault and murder of Reena Virk in Victoria, B.C. Virk was viciously assaulted and drowned in shallow water by a large group of female youth (Corrado, Odgers & Cohen, 2000, p. 191). Karla Homolka is another example of the sensationalised public female criminal, receiving continual media and public attention for her involvement in the 1993 rapes and murders of two young women. In Boucherville, Quebec, 1997,

a 17 year old female was charged with the malicious and unprovoked murder of her grandmother. In 1995, three teenage girls conspired to ambush, beat and drown their pimp in Burnaby, B.C.

The thought of women as violent offenders is troubling to Canadians. We have generally assumed that girls are immune to this behaviour (Cunningham, 2000, p. 1). Examples such as the murder of Reena Virk and the crimes of Karla Homolka are rare and isolated incidents, yet media coverage of such incidents relays the confused message that women are becoming fundamentally more violent. Until the 1990's, there had been a lack of research into nontraditional, violent crimes committed by women (Simpson, 1989, p. 619). Current media hype, combined with the apparent increase of violent women criminals, has provoked researchers to inquire into women's roles in these nontraditional crimes. Increased victim reporting and police charging practices have caused large increases in the violent crime rates among women offenders (Statistics Canada, 1999, as cited in Leschied, Cummings, Brunschot, Cunningham & Saunders, 2000, p. 5). Female adolescents have been particularly susceptible to increased victim reporting and police charging. A report by Statistics Canada (1999) confirmed that in the last decade, the violent crime rate of female adolescents has increased twice as fast than for male adolescents (as cited in Leschied et. al, 2000, p. 5).

Feminism, liberation, patriarchy and the biological differences between men and women are conventional ideologies that have laid the foundation for contemporary women's criminological theory. Beyond the social processes that influence women's criminality are the risk factors that impel and determine women's participation in violent crime. Research has indicated that poverty, substance abuse, physical and/or sexual abuse, peer influence and psychological factors lead to a greater risk for women's violence. An examination of these risk factors and the effect that they have on women are addressed in the following section.

RISK FACTORS

Researchers who study women offenders have identified multiple risk factors related to women's violent behaviour. High rates of physical and sexual abuse, severe drug addiction, peer influences, increasing high school drop out rates, low levels of academic and employment achievement and chronic dysfunction and abuse have been linked to violent behaviour among women (Corrado et al., 2000, p. 193). Particularly, girls who were physically or sexually victimised are at a higher risk for violence (Solicitor General of Canada [SGC], 2000, p. 2). Economic marginality (poverty, unemployment, single parent households) (Merlo & Pollock, 1995, p. 124), divorce rate and family violence (DeKeserdy, 2000, p. 91) assist in predicting which women could become violent offenders. Sommers and Baskin (1994) suggest that "the general orientation to risk with violence across gender reflects the convergence of social learning, control and ecological theories that help explain weak school attachments and parental supervision, associations with delinquent peers, as well as other social and economic processes" (p. 483).

Unemployment and Poverty

Unemployment and poverty rates among young women are increasing in Canada. This coincides with decreasing availability of public assistance, social services, higher education and good jobs. Economic marginalization combined with the socialization process that girls should be “good girls” puts young women in a difficult position (Reitsma-Street, 1999, p. 347). If a girl does not find a good job or does not attach herself to a person who has adequate legitimate income, she risks losing those few options open to “good girls.”

Family Violence

Family violence includes numerous variables that have been linked to violent behaviour in women. Verbal abuse, physical and/or sexual victimization by parents or family members, parental rejection and neglect are associated with aggressive behaviours. Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of family processes and family dynamics in promoting and maintaining aggressive behaviours. Viemero (1996) found that girls who were rejected by their parents were more likely to be aggressive (p. 92). Additionally, Saner and Ellickson (1996) found that low parental support and affection predicted persistent hitting and predatory violence in females (p. 99). Watts and Ellis (1993) investigated the effect of childhood sexual abuse in females on future adolescent and adult violent behaviour. They found that sexual abuse by a family member was highly correlated with aggression and violence in later years (as cited in Leschied et. al, p. 33).

Adult women offenders who have been incarcerated for violent offenses were found to have experienced high levels of both physical and sexual abuse. In federal American prisons, researchers established that 60% of women had experienced physical or sexual abuse in the past. More than a third of the women had been abused by an intimate partner in the past and just under a quarter reported prior abuse by a family member (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 1). In Canada, 68% of federally incarcerated women reported being physically abused and 53% sexually abused (DeKeserdy, 2000, p. 111). A subsection of that population, Aboriginal federally incarcerated women, had the greatest reports of past abuse. Ninety percent reported physical abuse and 61% reported sexual abuse.

Substance Abuse

The influence of drugs and alcohol has been correlated with women’s violent criminal behaviour. An estimated 40% of women committing violence were perceived by the victim as under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol at the time of the crime (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 1). Saner and Ellickson (1996) reported that the risks associated with long term alcohol and drug abuse in women include episodic violence or persistent violence (p. 97). Researchers have also connected drug use in women offenders with reoffending, particularly nonviolent reoffending (Corrado et al., 2000, p. 199). Long term and varied substance abuse is considered an indicator in predicting aggressive or violent behaviour in women.

Peer Factors

Caspi, Lynam, Moffitt and Silva (1993) researched the influence of peers on violent behaviour in child and adolescent females (p. 29). They found that females with a history of aggressive behaviour were more likely to associate with delinquent peers than females who did not display aggressive behaviour. Further, aggressive young women who continued associations with delinquent peers also continued aggressive and violent behaviours, because delinquent peer influence provided greater opportunity for behaviours.

The recent rise of gangs characterizes the extent of peer influences on violent behaviour in young women. The involvement of females in gangs is not necessarily a new phenomenon, but little research has investigated their roles and identities as gang members. What research has been done has found that gangs composed solely of females engage in high levels of crime and violent behaviour (Harris, 1994, p. 292). Females use physical violence as the primary form of social interaction and problem solving. Interestingly, females roles changed as they were part of a primarily male gang; they acted to suppress the male's violence and delinquent behaviour (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995, p. 422).

Several of the reasons that females joined gangs were similar to those of males, including economic and ethnic marginality, lack of available choices, material gain, supportive peer groups and an interest in violence. Females were unique from males with respect to one of the reasons they joined a gang; females stated that revenge was often a motivating factor. Common examples of revenge included if a sibling had been murdered or if they, or someone close to them, had been raped (Harris, 1994, p. 294).

Psychological Factors

Antisocial behaviour, conduct disorder, and depression are all strongly linked to the appearance of violent or aggressive tendencies in women. These factors become most apparent in teenage years and if not identified and treated, continue into adulthood. Progress has been made in federal correctional institutions across Canada to identify and treat mental health disorders in women. Unfortunately, in the majority of cases, treatment is available only after the violent offence has been committed and the woman has been imprisoned. Community options for mental health treatment are not abundant. Lack of community resources, combined with the fact that women may not know they need mental health treatment or are not aware that such services exist, leaves women at a higher risk for potential violent offending.

Antisocial characteristics contribute to the violent acts committed by women. Antisocial personality is defined as a lack of empathy or guilt, interpersonal deception, proneness to boredom, sensation seeking and early behavioural problems such as promiscuity (Salekin, Rodgers & Sewell, 1997, p. 583). In a 1997 study, Salekin, Rodgers and Sewell found that women with antisocial personality traits had high rates of marital separation, chronic unemployment and dependency on government agencies for social services. They had high rates of anxiety, depression and suicidal behaviour (p.

577). In fact, young, depressed women are nearly four times more likely to be aggressive than nondepressed women (SGC, 2000, p. 2). Violent women exhibited antisocial tendencies at a much higher rate than women who had committed nonviolent offences (Salekin et al., 1997, p. 583). Granic and Butler (1998) found that when tested on an anger scale, young women known to be violent held more antisocial beliefs and had higher scores on the anger scale than nonaggressive adolescents (p. 762).

Research into young women who display aggressive or violent behaviour found that close to 90% of aggressive girls had a conduct disorder, with the second most frequent classification being major depression (31%) (Zoccolio & Rogers, 1991, p. 979). Vanatta (1996) studied the association between suicidal behaviour and expression of aggression in women. This research found that as the risk of suicide increased, so did the frequency of violent behaviour (p. 566).

Mental health has become an increasingly important issue regarding violent women offenders, particularly for women who are incarcerated. Studies have shown that women incarcerated for violent offenses have high levels of psychological distress. A current review of a sample of federally incarcerated violent women offenders revealed that 17% of the population had a major mental disorder. Of this 17%, 26% had alcohol use/dependence, 21% had drug use/dependence, 16% had an antisocial personality, 14% had a psychosexual dysfunction, 14% had major depression and 8% had a generalized anxiety disorder (Correctional Service of Canada [CSC], 2000b, p. 1).

These statistics reveal the necessity of mental health treatment for women displaying violent behaviour. Currently, there is strong support for mental health treatment for women in prison, although reasons for this support are double edged. One side of the argument is that mental health treatment provides a more effective rehabilitative route to dealing with the risk factors associated with violent behaviour. Supporting this viewpoint, Wilson (1985, as cited in Simpson, 1989) considers the mental health system superior to the criminal justice system in terms of its ability to socially control violent offending women. Wilson's position is that women deal with different social issues than men, and the mental health system has a greater capacity to deal with those issues (p. 17).

The other side of the argument is that traditional stereotyping by society and members of the criminal justice system continues to exist with regards to women and mental health. There continues to be a preference to view women as "mad" rather than "bad" (Emerson, Dobash & Noaks, 1995, p. 20). This view upholds that women are natural contenders for mental health treatment since violence is not naturally in their disposition. This view is validated when women who commit violence (homicide or infanticide) are placed in the mental health system (i.e., psychiatric hospitals) much more frequently than men who commit equivalent crimes.

Mental health treatment is now more routinely provided in federal correctional facilities in Canada. Changes to the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA) are intended to make the system be responsive to the special needs of women with mental health problems (CSC, 2000a, p. 1). Commissioners Directive 850, Mental Health Services, states that a continuum of essential care for

those suffering from mental, emotional and behavioural disorders will be provided, consistent with professional and community standards. It also includes assessment and treatment for those suffering from various mental disorders (CSC, 2000a, p. 1). It seems that progressive legislation and directives have been implemented, but future research is needed to determine if these programs, policies and practices are effective.

The risk factors that potentially lead an individual to violent behaviour are not static. Their predictive value changes depending on when they occur in a young person's development, in what social context and under what circumstances. These risk factors may be found in the individual, the environment or the individual's ability to respond to the demands or requirements of the environment. The criminal justice system has identified, or at least acknowledged, women with needs.

We have seen that social and economic risk factors are linked to women's behaviour. This only partially explains the actual increase in female violence. There are also some social and justice system responses that account for increased numbers of women in the system, as we will see in the following section.

SOCIAL AND JUDICIAL RESPONSES

Women are not necessarily becoming more violent. There are few differences between the risk factors that leave women susceptible to violent behaviour and those that leave men susceptible. Rather, responses to women involved in crime are changing. Definitions of violence and aggression have broadened, taking into account minor and verbal assaults that were not previously dealt with formally by the justice system. Members of the criminal justice system are more likely now to label a female engaged in violence as criminal than they were before (Cunningham, 2000, p. 1). As well, society has taken a zero tolerance attitude to crime, affecting both female and male criminals. Since women have traditionally been treated more leniently by the criminal justice system, zero tolerance policies have affected women much more significantly than men. Therefore, charging, sentencing and custodial processes directed at women appear to have massively increased. Finally, media publicity regarding female criminality has increased, while publicity surrounding male criminality has decreased (DeKeserdy, 2000, p. 92). All of these factors leave the incorrect impression that women are becoming drastically more violent.

The Definition of Assault

One explanation of why women's violent crime rates have increased is that the definition of aggression has broadened. The recent addition of verbal threats and intimidation to the definition of assault may mean that more women are labelled aggressive today than in the past (SGC, 2000, p. 1). For example, a minor injury, but something more than "transient or trifling in nature," can be assault causing bodily harm and virtually anything can be a "weapon" (Doob & Sprott, 1998, p. 192). Evidence of this broadened definition is seen in women's violent crime statistics in 1999: almost 3

in 4 violent victimizations committed by women offenders were minor assaults (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 2).

Victim Reporting and Police Charging

Official crime rates for women reflect criminal behaviour rather poorly, but they are accurate measures of police responses to crime (Hackler, 1994, p. 258). Two factors have led to increased charges against women: there is increased victim reporting and police now have policies that require charges to be laid in certain situations. Police ability to use discretion not to charge in a violent incident has been reduced. Victim reporting and police charging policies have had a tremendous negative effect on the number of women entering the criminal justice system. However, it will be seen that the majority of charges being laid against women are for minor assaults and administrative technicalities. Further, evidence suggests that young women are affected more than adult women by victim reporting and police charging policies.

Among adult women offenders, the number of serious charges like murder, aggravated assault, arson, break and enter, fraud, robbery, major theft and trafficking or possession of drugs have constantly remained low. In fact, the per capita rate of murder by women in 1998 was the lowest recorded since 1976. In the United States, the rate at which adult women commit murder has declined steadily since 1980 (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 1). In Canada, since 1992, the national rate of violent crime among adult women has increased slightly in the Prairie, Pacific and Atlantic regions, although Ontario and Quebec regions had a slight decline (CSC, 1998b, p. 2). By offense, homicide remained stable at a low rate from 1992 to 1996, and there was a slight decrease in attempted murder, physical assault, abduction, robbery and sexual assault and other sexual offenses (CSC, 1998b, p. 2).

Violent crime rates among adolescent females appear to be the only area *consistently* showing an increase in Canada (Statistics Canada, 1999, as cited in Leschied et al., 2000, p. 5). From 1991 to 1997, the Canadian rate of charging female youth for violent offences increased from 38 per 10,000 to 47 per 10,000 (CSC, 1998a, p. 2). The Prairie region was found to have highest rate per 10,000 female youth charged, although the Pacific, Ontario and Atlantic regions increased in the rate of female youth charged for violent crimes, while the Quebec region slightly increased (CSC, 1998a, p. 16). Statistics Canada (1999) found that female youth charged with violent offences increased 14% in 4 years; from 4,882 charges in 1994 to 5,652 charges in 1998 (as cited in Leschied et al., p. 6). By offence, female youth committing homicide slightly increased over the 6 year period. Abduction, sexual assault and other sexual offences remained relatively stable, physical assault and robbery increased and attempted murder slightly decreased (CSC, 1998a, p. 2).

Misinterpreted Statistics

Misinterpreted statistics are those that are statistically correct, but the information they relay is extremely misleading and out of context. Misleading statistics influence public, political and criminal justice perceptions of women's violent crime rates. Pate (1998), of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, was queried concerning a 200% increase in violent offending of young women by a local police source:

Further investigation revealed that two young women had been charged with robbery; one about ten years earlier and the other had just occurred. Prior to that, there were apparently no charges or convictions of women on record. So, technically, the statistic was correct. The impression created by the 200% figure and the accompanying media hype, however, created an incredibly inaccurate picture of women suddenly erupting into violent behaviour. The reality was that the violent behaviour that was perceived to be erupting was pretty much nonexistent and the risk posed to the public was incredibly low. (p. 1)

Current federal statistics provide a better indication of the true extent of women's violent criminal behaviour. In 1998 in the United States, an estimated 3.2 million arrests of women accounted for approximately 22% of all arrests that year. The per capita rate of arrest among juvenile females was nearly twice the adult female rate (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 1). In Canada, from 1988 to 1998, statistics showed that violent crimes committed by female youth also increased twice as fast (127%) than their male counterparts (65%). In comparison, violence committed by adult women offenders increased by only 6% (Cunningham, 2000, p. 1).

Doob and Sprott (1998) investigated the degree of violence that Canadian female youth (12-18) are engaging in. They found that although violent crime charges were increasing for female youth offenders, the rate of *serious* violent acts (aggravated assault, assault with a weapon, homicide) committed by female youth is very low. Results from their study determined that less than 300 girls per 100,000 were charged with minor assaults in the last five years, less than 60 per 100,000 for assault with a weapon and less than 4 per 100,000 for aggravated assaults (p. 191). Corrado, Odgers and Cohen (2000) found comparable results. Their research into Canadian youth female offending patterns found that nonviolent and administrative offences counted for 69% of all charges laid while only 6% were violent in nature (p. 198). Additionally, this research determined that female youth were spending approximately 26 days in custody for less serious administrative offences and 18 days for substantive (violent and/or serious) offences.

Caution must be taken by those who declare that women are becoming more violent. Although figures such as those discussed in the previous section suggest that young women are becoming very violent very quickly, it is important to note that 70% to 80% of charges laid against young women are administrative offences. Of the remaining 20% to 30%, 6% of charges laid against young women are violent in nature, and minor assaults constitute approximately 4% to 5% of this 6%. Less than

1% (of this 6%) of violent charges against women are for aggravated assault, assault with a weapon or homicide (Corrado et al., 2000, p. 198). As well, researchers found that when nonviolent and less serious administrative offences were combined with the actual low percentage (approximately 1%) of *serious* violent offences, there was no overall increase of youth (CSC, 1998a, p. 1) or adult (CSC, 1998b, p. 1) females charged.

Political Implications: Zero Tolerance

Zero tolerance policies have criminalized behaviour for women that was previously dealt with outside the court system (Cunningham, 2000, p. 1). Politicians from all parties compete for the “toughest” approach to crime. As a result, zero tolerance policies have emerged, leading to increased policing and prosecuting in an attempt to reduce violence in society. Increased formal social control has resulted in increased female arrests due to greater documentation of female crime, more specialized professionals, sophisticated computer assisted record keeping, and more formal and established procedures for handling deviant behaviour. This effect on women charged with offences is more dramatic today because the justice system has been more lenient on women offenders in the past. The actual number of women involved in criminal activity is not increasing; society is just apprehending them more (Merlo & Pollock, 1995, p. 125).

Increased Use of Custody

Violent women offenders enter into the criminal justice system through a series of steps. The successive stages that lead to women being incarcerated begin with the violent act committed, the victim reporting the act, police laying charges followed by court proceedings. If the court process results in a conviction, the woman is incarcerated. The combination of increased police charging practices and lower tolerance policies in the courtroom leads to more women being incarcerated than ever before. The following examination of recent trends of the Canadian criminal justice responses to violent women offenders reveals that the rates of incarceration are increasing for both female youth and adult female offenders.

Because of a dramatic increase in the rate of female youth processed through courts in Canada, more female youth are being incarcerated in Canada than in previous years. Between 1991 and 1997, the Prairie region had the highest rate of female youth going through the court system, with 328 per 10,000 cases (CSC, 1998a, p. 15). The second highest rate of female youth going through the court system was in Ontario, with 232 per 10,000 cases (CSC, 1998a, p. 15). The high Aboriginal youth population in the Prairies is believed to be the reason for high rates. In the same time frame (1991 to 1997) this dramatic increase of female youth processed through the courts led to a 49% increase of female youth that were incarcerated (CSC, 1998a, p. 47). Future predictions suggest that the use of custodial dispositions by courts and the number of girls held in custody are expected to increase.

Adult female offenders are also spending more time in custody. The increased rates of police charging toward adult female offenders has not been as dramatic as it has for female youth offenders, but it has

still affected incarceration rates among adult women offenders. In the last 20 years, the proportion of adult women charged with a criminal offence has increased from 14% to 18% (CSC, 1999, p. 9). This 4% increase is responsible for the increased numbers of women in both provincial-territorial facilities and federal facilities. The proportion of women admitted to provincial-territorial custody has increased from 5% to 9% and to federal custody from 3% to 5% (CSC, 1999, p. 9). From 1996 to 1999 alone, there was a 7% increase of federally incarcerated adult women offenders. Once again, the most significant increase was in the Prairie region (CSC, 1999, p. 2).

The current profile of incarcerated women offenders in Canada raises two concerns. First, there is a high over-representation of Aboriginal women offenders in incarcerated populations. Aboriginal women account for 2% of Canada's total population but account for 20% of federally incarcerated women. This disproportionate representation is a strong indicator of the need for social interventions for Aboriginal women, particularly in the Prairie provinces. Second, although 64% of women have been committed for violent offenses, only 37% (of this 64%), or a total of 58% of all violent offences, were for serious violent offences such as homicide or attempted murder. The second highest category of offenses leading women to incarceration in federal institutions is drug related crime (27%). The fact that so many women are being incarcerated in federal prisons for nonviolent and drug related offences reflects the lack of alternatives available to high risk women.

The previous section examined the social and justice responses that have contributed to the perceived increase of women offenders in Canada. Redefining assault, harsher and more frequent police charging practices, zero tolerance policies, misinterpreted statistics and the increased number of women in prison all contribute to the perceived increase in violence by women. These factors, combined with women who are susceptible to physical and/or sexual abuse, substance abuse, poverty and mental health problems, contribute to the increased rates at which women are being *charged* and *incarcerated* for violent crime. There is no direct evidence to support the claim that women are fundamentally becoming more violent. The distinction between increased violence among women and increased rates of violent crime among women has been largely blurred. The following segment attempts to unravel the mystery of "violent women" and address the issues, benefits and complications of present government, legal and community responses to violent crime.

DISCUSSION

There are a number of issues relevant to women and violence. The rate that women commit serious violent crimes is low, but has been blown out of proportion by media, law enforcement and government responses and the public's reactions. The continual focus on "violent women" maximizes public fear and minimizes the need for social and community programming necessary to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. Incarceration as a means to control women who commit violent acts is not necessarily rehabilitative, but a "quick fix" to deeper rooted social problems. Progress has been made in federal institutions to deal with violent women offenders and the needs they face. Unfortunately, these treatment and assessment programs are available only after women

have committed crimes that leave them incarcerated for a number of years. Little is available to prevent violent behaviour from occurring in the first place. Finally, there are different motivators that lead women to commit violent crimes than the motivators for men. However, the risk factors that relate to violent behaviour by women are equally valid predictors of violence by men. It appears the trend in Canadian popular culture is to focus on violent women as a fascinating new class of offender. Although women offenders are currently more publicized, they are still the great minority of "violent offender." Men continue to perform between 80% and 85% of violent offences in both Canada and the United States (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 20).

Research and policy attention should focus on the gap between the actual low rate of female crime and the disproportionately high public fear that girls are out of control (Reitsma-Street, 1999, p. 350). In order to fundamentally address the issues surrounding female offenders, it is important not to exaggerate inaccurate claims about increased violent offending. This overemphasis on female violence deflects attention away from the increased poverty among girls and inadequate public support for the educational, social, and economic development of girls (Reitsma-Street, 1999, p. 351). This leaves women disadvantaged due to a lack of gender focussed community programming and services and extremely limited access to open custody settings.

Currently, the justice system uses incarceration as an alternative to adequate social and community programming. There are very few effective noncustodial policy initiatives that are available for young female offenders (Corrado et al., 2000, p. 204). Longer sentences have not proved helpful in protecting society or rehabilitating violent offenders. Current responses from the Canadian justice system suggest that incarceration is being used to protect women offenders from external deviant factors that may influence them (i.e., drugs, street life, physical and sexual abuse). These may be well intentioned efforts, but due to a lack of alternatives, the criminal justice system provides nothing more than short-term protection (Corrado et al., 2000, p. 205). Incarcerating youth female offenders for nonviolent offences is a "quick-fix" method that avoids addressing the fundamental social justice and equality issues. Incarceration should be the last option considered when sentencing women offenders. It is beneficial for women in the justice system to be served by supportive and proactive interventions, as opposed to punitive and reactive approaches characteristic of many criminal justice responses.

Research has shown that there are certain factors, such as survival, that lead women to violence more often than men. In this circumstance, violence is economically motivated, either to sustain life on the street, assist family finances or seek the assistance of others through the acquisition of material goods (Cunningham, 2000, p. 5). Violent behaviour of women may indicate defensive adaptations of surviving with abuse. Reasons such as escape (via substance abuse, running away, early home or school leaving or suicide attempts) and stigma/self-concept, where young women seeking love and acceptance live with abusive and substance abusing partners, leave women at a higher risk of acting violently. Moreover, because women are more prone to sexual or physical victimization during childhood, they may be at a greater risk for violent behaviour in later years.

In terms of risk factors linked to crime, there are no distinctions between risk factors that lead men and women to violent crime. In pre-adolescence, indicators of potential delinquent behaviour are not differentiated by gender. Future delinquent behaviour is predicted by poor grades, rejection by peers, substance abuse, dropping out of school, being a violent offender, being criminally charged and the presence of psychiatric disorders (Tremblay, 2000, p. 8). There is a particularly high level of similarity for men and women in understanding how family violence affects future personal use of violence. How women and men justify using violence is generally the same. Motivators for both men and women include revenge, protection or from influences of alcohol and/or drugs. In most cases, the risk factors are equally valid predictors of violence and delinquency regardless of race, gender or ethnicity.

Canadian federal correctional institutions have implemented women centred programming to address the needs of women offenders by providing strategies and programs for supervising and treating them. Section 77 (a) and (b) of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA) reflects the importance of gender sensitive training and programming:

Section 77:

- (a) provide programs designed particularly to address the needs of female offenders.
- (b) consult regularly about programs for female offenders with
 - i. appropriate women's groups, and
 - ii. other appropriate persons and groups with expertise on, and experience in working with female offenders.

Programs that are specific to women are based on such conditions as acknowledgement of race, class and sexual orientation. Programs integrate issues of addiction, women's development and trauma (CSC, 1999, p. 25). Additionally, the Edmonton Institution for Women (EIFW) provides a Peer Support Program (PSP) and a Mentoring group. The goal of the PSP is to provide federally incarcerated women with nonjudgmental support, information, help with problem-solving and referrals (CSC, 1999, p. 29). The Mentoring group consists of individuals who enter into a relationship of listening, sharing and exchanging information, experiences and personal development strategies with a federally sentenced woman.

There are still obstacles to reducing violence in society. The greatest obstacle is the lack of community programming to prevent, or at least intervene, when individuals exhibit high risk behaviour that could potentially lead to violence. Women centred programming at federal women's institutions across the country are an innovative first step for rehabilitative and effective programming for high risk women. Integrated treatment programs in the community should address emotional, social and practical lifestyle needs in order to prevent potential violent behaviour. Outreach programs to identify individuals who are at a high risk for violent behaviour should be implemented for individuals who do not know that help is available. More effective relationships and communication among the criminal justice and community service systems, the community, courts and corrections should be able to analyse shared information, develop shared objectives and

implement policy at each point in the system. The key to preventing future violence is detecting the risk factors associated with violent behaviour, and intervening early enough.

CONCLUSION

Women offenders have continued to face discrimination despite equality before the law. Additionally, women offenders must now manage a new public fear of the “violent female” despite strong evidence that it is social and justice system responses to women offenders that are changing and not the nature of women’s behaviour itself. Statistical interpretation and media sensationalism paint an incredibly inaccurate picture of women suddenly “erupting” into violence. Awareness of the factors causing this perceived increase of women offenders is essential to reduce negative and discriminatory stereotypes. Contributions to the appearance of higher female crime rates include broader definitions of aggression and violence, increased rates of charging women, less tolerance by governments and politicians for any crime and increased custodial dispositions used to treat and “protect” young females. The shift in the federal correctional system toward woman centred treatment and rehabilitative policies and programs are positive changes and therefore fundamental to supporting female offending populations. Community program initiatives are not developed to the extent that they could be truly effective in assisting women offenders. Cooperation between criminal justice and community systems appears to be the most effective route to successful prevention, intervention and rehabilitation of women offenders.

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