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Female Violent Offending, Theoretical Models of

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Women comprise a small population of adults arrested and sentenced for violent offenses within the United States—14% and 5%, respectively, in 2015 according to the national statistics from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Common categories of violent crime are robbery, assault, and homicide. Analyses of national data available through the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that rates of violent crime by women have been relatively stable since the mid-1960s. Despite some isolated increases in rates of assaults, rates of other violent offenses by women have dropped since 1990. The increase in the number of women arrested for assaults is often attributed to the implementation of mandatory arrest policies for domestic violence incidents.

Women convicted of violent offenses are more likely to have histories of certain adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, single-parent household, and parent with mental health concerns, than women convicted of nonviolent offenses. Additional research suggests that women with violent offenses engage in more severe substance use (e.g., younger starting age and higher rates of polysubstance use) and have higher rates of mental health disorder symptoms than women without violent offenses. However, no one factor significantly distinguishes women convicted of violent offenses from women convicted of nonviolent offenses.

Women's violence is connected to the context of their primary relationships. Women convicted of violent offenses describe being introduced to criminal activity, criminal networks, and violent crime by their male partners. Over three fourths of violent women offenders commit their offenses with co-offenders, and fewer than 14% of women have a primary role in the offense. Research analyzing the role of these male co-offenders indicates that women frequently are 1-time violent offenders. Only a small proportion of women engage in repeat violent offending.

Women's acts of violence are mainly isolated events that occur within the context of an established relationship. Nearly half of all homicides perpetrated by women involve an intimate partner with an additional one third of victims described as acquaintances. Nationally, 15% of women have reported physically striking a partner, 8% a friend, and 6% a stranger. The most commonly reported motivation for women's use of violence with intimate partners is self-defense. Women who are violent against their intimate partners have low rates of general violence (e.g., street fights). Given the relational aspect of women's violence, most research focuses on women's engagement in intimate partner violence with limited attention to general violence (i.e., violence perpetrated against targets other than partners, such as community members and strangers).

A few differences exist between women's acts of general violence and intimate partner violence. Women have described their experiences of general violence perpetration as more likely to have a female victim, occur in public space with involved bystanders, and motivated by feeling disrespected by another woman, whereas women's descriptions of experiences of intimate partner violence perpetration more often have a male victim and occur in private spaces. Both groups of women frequently report extensive trauma histories; however, women who engage in general violence have higher rates of trauma-related symptoms and histories of witnessing maternal violence. Only a limited body of research examines women's engagement in a range of violent behaviors.

Theories explicitly investigating women's involvement in criminal behaviors have evolved over time, and this entry focuses on these theoretical shifts.

Traditional Models of Violent Offending

The majority of theories about female offenders have focused on issues surrounding women's increased involvement in crime over time, with scant attention to violent crimes committed by women. Theories that have explored women and violence typically have tried to explain why women are less likely to commit violent crimes than men. Early on, these theories centered on biological differences between men and women and included references to testosterone, neurochemicals linked to impulsivity, and the greater muscular strength

of men. Later, cultural and socialization theories dominated the literature on gender differences and violence. Pivotal to these theories is the differential socialization of men and women; men are more commonly rewarded for violence, and women are taught to suppress aggressive impulses. As an extension of socialization theories, liberation theory suggests that socialization processes have changed over time due to the second wave of feminism and women's emergence into nontraditional sex roles. As a result, women have supposedly adopted more masculine behaviors, including violent behaviors. However, these theories have not been extensively tested or backed up with empirical investigation.

Theoretical Shifts for Women and Violence

Apart from the theories that address the gender disparity in violent crime rates, the question of why some women commit violent crimes and others do not has been largely neglected. The theories that have emerged incorporate many of the risk factors for violent offending that are relatively unique to female populations. This has resulted in a shift away from the mere extension of male-centered theories of violent crime that was characteristic of much of the early correctional literature; many theories such as social learning theory and differential association theory were based on research with samples of only men and with little attention to gender. Theories that portrayed women who commit violent acts as social deviants with biological aberrations have largely been discredited. Current theorists underscore the importance of context, considering the role of social, structural, political, and economic factors. Two theoretical approaches, pathways theory and trauma theory, provide insight into factors associated with women's violence, and in addition, two other theories seek to explain why some women are violent and some are not: the Feminist Ecological Model (FEM) and the overcontrolled–undercontrolled personality concept.

Pathways Theory and Trauma Theory

Differences in life experiences between men and women offenders have supported pathways theory, a theoretical perspective on women's trajectories into criminal activity, including violent behaviors. Pathways theory focuses on how women's lives are influenced by structural oppression, gender expectations and gender socialization, and punitive societal responses to certain behaviors. In addition, trauma theory posits that experiencing trauma can distort women's conceptualizations of healthy relationships and hamper psychological development. Women's experiences of trauma and adversity (e.g., childhood abuse and neglect, parental substance abuse, housing instability) are linked to women's involvement in violence. Biological and psychological studies of the effects of trauma demonstrate links between traumatic experiences, women's processing of events, relational patterns, responses to additional life stressors, vulnerabilities to substance use, and ultimately, engaging in violence.

Women involved in the criminal justice system report extensive histories of childhood adversity and trauma at higher rates than men involved in the system. Childhood adversity and trauma have been linked to adult risk factors (e.g., substance use disorders) and involvement in violent behavior for women. Also, women with histories of childhood adversity and trauma have higher rates of arrests and convictions for violent crimes than women without such histories. Furthermore, childhood adversity and trauma are specific significant risk factors for women's perpetration of intimate partner violence.

Victimization is often prevalent across the life course for women offenders. For example, childhood victimization is a significant risk factor for adult victimization, which is linked to general violence and intimate partner violence perpetration by women. The theme of the research about violent women offenders is that they are often simultaneously victims and perpetrators of violence, especially with their male partners. Women who

experience both roles also more often have high rates of childhood adversity, neglect, and abuse.

Pathways and trauma theories provide insight into the disproportionate factors that women offenders experience with an understanding of the connections between life events. Pathways theory positions these factors within a larger societal context and considers the particular intersections of life factors for women. These theories provide some insight into the factors connected to women's involvement in violence.

FEM

The FEM stresses the context in women's commission of violent acts. This model addresses the complexity of women's violence, taking into account interactions between social, historical, institutional, and individual factors, and has been recommended for understanding women's violence. The model consists of four interactive levels, with the first situating the individual in the environment. At this level, several factors are prominent: cognitions, temperament, socialization, interactions with significant others and dimensions of identity (e.g., ethnicity, class, age). The second level, referred to as the microsystem, is concerned with the family environment and the important role it plays in shaping the individual's thoughts and beliefs. The FEM suggests that gender and culture influence how individuals interact with their families and immediate environments. The next level, the exosystem, is the broader community outside the home, including the individual's school and neighborhood. The final level is the macrosystem or society at large. It includes factors such as culture, socioeconomic group, media influences, and exposure to violence. Each of these systems or levels interacts with the others in a reciprocal fashion, thereby shaping individuals' lives and developmental processes. This model guides research on women's use of violence, and positing violence is influenced by exposure to violence within the family, community, and larger culture.

Although few studies apply FEM to violence perpetrated by women, variables associated with each of these levels have been identified as risk factors for violence among women. For example, histories of family violence, negative peer influences, and exposure to violent media images are prominent factors among women with violent offenses. Women's exposure to risk factors across levels and the life course may increase the likelihood of women's violence.

Overcontrolled and Undercontrolled Personalities

Theories that examine overcontrolled and undercontrolled personalities emphasize that factors both internal and external to the individual are instrumental in predicting violence. Theorists initially identified these personality styles among male juvenile offenders and found the undercontrolled personality to be particularly characteristic of aggressive boys. Lowered inhibitions against aggressive behavior lead to the likelihood of aggressive responses when frustrated or provoked. Overcontrolled aggressors are far less common but tend to be young men who commit extremely violent crimes, such as homicide. These offenders show lower overall rates of aggression. It is hypothesized that these men inhibit their feelings of anger, which results in anger accumulating over time and through repeated provocation, with the ultimate result being an isolated explosion of anger and violence. In 2000, researchers analyzed the overcontrolled hostility construct with a sample of women offenders. The hostility construct effectively identified the 1-time offenders from the repeat violent offenders and nonviolent offenders. In contrast, repeat violent offenders showed undercontrolled attributes. This empirical application of the overcontrolled personality concept provides significant clinical implications for working with violent women offenders.

Treatment Directions

Across research, several factors are key target areas for treatment programming and services for women convicted of violent offenses. These factors include adverse childhood experiences, adulthood victimization experiences, relational dynamics and relationships across the life span, substance use, mental health, and anger. Research reviews of programming available for women involved in the criminal justice system have found that a majority of treatment opportunities for women focus on reducing substance use; however, developments in gender-responsive and trauma-informed programming include a broader array of issues and outcomes for women. As a hallmark program, one intervention was created specifically for women convicted of violent offenses, titled *Beyond Violence: A Prevention Program for Criminal Justice-Involved Women*. This program incorporates multiple theories with a focus on women's anger, mental health, substance use, relationships, violence victimization and perpetration, and community experiences. Positive short-term and long-term outcomes for this intervention have been found across studies with multiple populations and in different state prisons. Overall, more research is needed regarding efficacious treatment options regarding women and violence.

See also [Female Offenders](#); [Female Offenders: Gender Differences in Criminal Offense Characteristics](#); [Female Offenders: Prevalence and Statistics](#); [Gender and Crime](#); [Gendered Pathways](#); [Violent Offenders](#)

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Further Readings

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