

UNIVERSITY OF SUNDERLAND

SCHOOL OF HEALTH, NATURAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

CRI201: ISSUES IN CRIMINOLOGY

MODULE LEADER: NICOLA GROVES

ASSIGNMENT 2: ESSAY

CRITICALLY EVALUATE THE PROPOSITION THAT, 'DUE TO THE GROWTH OF THE MODERN WOMENS MOVEMENT THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASE IN FEMALE OFFENDING SINCE THE EARLY 1970S'

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This essay will consider whether there has been a growth in female crime since the early 1970s and whether this is linked to the growth in the modern women's movement. In order to do this I will highlight the links that have been made between an increase in female crime and the women's movement such as the decrease in chivalry, and an increase in 'maleness'. I will also draw attention to the possibility that these links could also be caused by the way crime statistics are put together, for example arrest rates, and that all crime is rising not just female, and that we need to look at specific crimes rather than crimes in general. The essay will consider patterns of female crime over history looking at the work of Feeley and Little (1991) who argue that female crime was on par with male crime 150 years ago and has been in steady decline since and that this is due to the shift in female roles within society.

It has been proposed that there has been an increase in female criminality and that this increase is linked to the second wave of feminism in the 1960s/70s. The issue was first raised by Freda Adler (1975) in *'Sisters in Crime'* which establishes that the increase in female crime is proof that the feminist movement is working, as women are freer to behave like men (Williams 2004: 470; Heidensohn 2002: 496). Since the women's movement it has been viewed by some writers that women are obtaining similar social positions to men and this will inevitably include the positions in criminal activity. They could leave the private sphere of the home and engage in the public sphere of work, leading to unacceptable social opportunities such as crime (Williams 2004: 471). Heidensohn (2002: 496) suggests that it was viewed that women offending was changing, it was becoming more masculine, for example more aggressive and violent.

Furthermore, Malcolm Feeley and Deborah Little (1991) in their work *'The Vanishing Female'* which investigates the decline in female offending between 1687 and 1912 using records from London's Old Bailey, found that female offending was at a high in the early eighteenth century at 45 per cent and steadily decreased to the norm of around 15 per cent we say today. Their reasoning for this is the embrace of more civilised forms of punishment, and the development of the criminal justice systems and processes we see today. They also identify 'significant shifts in the roles accorded to women in the economy, the family and society' (*ibid*: 719). These changes combined diverted women away from the criminal justice system, they state

that, ‘the nature of control was shifted to the male as the husband and to other institutions increasingly defined as suited to “distinctively female problems”’ (*ibid*: 750). This idea also contributes to the view that the female crime rate may be increasing due to the feminist movement, as the social restrictions on women are said to be decreasing. But the percentage amount of female crime does not equate to the high level of female crime, in the early eighteenth century, conveyed through the work of Feeley and Little.

King (1999) and Godfrey (1999), among other writers, bring to our attention the debates about leniency towards women in the criminal justice system as a further cause of the reducing rate of female crime in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (cited in Heidensohn 2002:499).

Evidence today also shows that since 1992 the female prison population has increased by 173% compared to a 50% increase in the male population (Home office 2003: vi). The Home Office report suggests that this is a result of an increased use of custody sentences by the courts for less serious offences rather than an increase in female offending (*ibid*). Williams (2004: 484) also draws attention to the increased evidence of harsher punishments for women even though the number of crimes committed by women decreased in the 1990s (Appendix 2).

There are also statistical results highlighted by such writers as Adler (1975) and Simon (1975) which show a 100 per cent rise in female offending from 1965 to 1975, including a 500 per cent rise in murder (Williams 2004: 470). Alder’s criminal statistics are also reiterated in Leonard’s writings, she shows that, ‘between 1960 and 1972, the arrest rate for robbery increased 277 per cent for females, 169 per cent for males. Likewise, embezzlement arrests were up 280 per cent for females, 50 per cent for males; larceny up 303 per cent for females, 82 per cent for males; and finally, burglary was up 168 per cent for females, 63 per cent for males’ (Leonard 1982: 42).

Williams (2004:470) questions the use of such examples of statistics highlighting that the 500 per cent rise in murder actually represented an increase from 1 offence to 5 offences and that this dramatic rise is only emphasised by women’s lack of involvement in criminal activity. Carole Smart (1979) argues that Adler’s

theory is based on 'statistical illusions caused by a smallness of the base' (cited in Kelta Advanced Learning 2003). Smart (1979) also finds that the female crime rate was already increasing at a faster rate long before the advent of the modern women's movement (cited in Heidensohn 2002:497). Leonard (1982: 42) also highlights the distorted impression Alder conveys with the dramatic percentage increases in female crime, showing that when they are compared to male crime they are a minor part of the total crime picture, for example, 'it is true that female burglary rates are up 168 per cent, but, as of 1972, men were still responsible for 94.9 per cent of the arrests from burglary' (*ibid*).

It is also argued that the validity and reliability of the criminal statistics should be taken into account when making a connection between the feminist movement and an increase in female crime. Box and Hale (1983) attack the whole idea of a link emphasizing that earlier writers misuse the available statistics (Williams 2004:470). It is presented that previous writers only looked at crimes from the previous years when deeming there was an increase, they failed to note whether there had been an increase in the female population, particularly the necessary age group (Williams 2004:471). An example of this can be seen in the Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice (2000) publication by the Home Office which states, 'By 2005 there are expected to be around 3% more females aged 10-59 in the population than in 1999. The number in the 15-20 age group, covering the peak age of offending, is expected to increase by over 8%'. Appendix 1 shows the estimated female population of England and Wales from 1990 to 1999, when compared to appendix 2 which shows the number of females found guilty of indictable offences from 1935 to 1999, there is a relationship between a drop in female offending between 1990 and 1995 and a decrease in the female population aged between 15-20. Writers argue that this cannot be ignored when investigating female crime.

The limitations of the official crime statistics should also be considered. Statistics can be influenced by a number of factors. Maguire (2002: 335) brings to our attention the affect of police discretion and that it was not until April 2002 that a National Recording Standard (NCRS) was introduced. The figures of female criminality are additionally vulnerable to the shifts in policing, recording and other policies as the numbers are so small (Smart 1979, cited in Heidensohn 2002: 497).

This is reinforced by writers such as Brown (1986) who argues that 'feminism has made female crime more visible through increased reporting, policing and sentencing of female offenders' (cited in Kelta Advanced Learning 2003). The work of theorists such as Feeley and Little (1991) recognises the problems with criminal statistics identifying increased problems when looking at historical data highlighting, 'the lack of a reliable data base' and that, 'invariably research is based on some type of reported crime, but reporting systems have filters that encourage some and deter others from reporting' (Feeley and Little 1991: 720).

It has also been stressed that there is a failure to take into account that male crime has also increased, leaving doubts as to whether the rise in female crime is linked to the women's movement or whether there should be concerns for crime in general (Williams 2004:471). Also the level of male crime is still significantly higher than that for females, 'criminal statistics show that in 2002 only 19 per cent of known offenders were women' (Home Office 2003: iii). Leaving 81 per cent of known offenders to be men.

Williams (2004:471) also highlights that there is a failure to take into account the wide range of categories of crime recorded. Leonard (1982:35) shows from data recorded on crime in America that increases in female crime in the last 25 years is specifically within larceny theft, fraud and forgery, whereas within violent crimes it has barely changed. Statistics today show that theft and handling is the most common indictable offence for women accounting for 57% of known female offenders in 2002 (Home office 2003: iii). As noted earlier, a connection was made between the modern women's movement and an increase of females involved in more masculine crimes. It is shown in statistics from America and England that the amount of violent crime committed by women has generally remained the same.

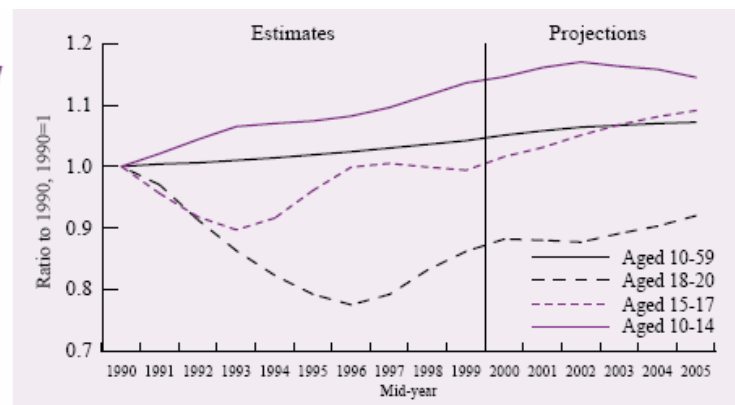
To conclude, this essay has addressed the notion that the increase in female crime is linked to the growth in the modern women's movement. It has highlighted the reasoning behind it using the work of Adler (1979) who believed that the increase in female crime was a representation that the female movement was working and Feeley (1991) identifies that the high level of female crime may be linked to the lesser restrictions on women by society. Crime rates seem to reduce in line with the

demands on women and womanly roles. It showed that there was a dramatic increase in percentage of women offending (murder up 500 per cent) but this is questioned by Heidensohn and Smart as ignoring the wider picture as they only highlight a small minority of recorded crime in which the males dominate and that these statistics could be misleading. This essay has also shown the women's movement may have had an indirect effect in the increase in female crime as it pushed the government and police to look more at women. Williams (2002: 487) notes that, 'thirty years ago women were less likely to be suspected of crime, when suspected they were less likely to be charged and prosecuted; and finally, when prosecuted they were less likely to be convicted, than they are today'. Women's behaviour in crime remained unchanged but rather the criminal justices response to young female crime increased.

Appendix 1

Figure 1.1:

Female population of England and Wales, Population estimates 1990-1999, projections 2000-2005



From: the Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice (2000) Home office publication under section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991. p1

Appendix 2

Number of males and females found guilty of indictable offences per 100,000 of the male and female population respectively.

	1935	1945	1955	1965	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1999
Male	370	512	502	971	1,694	1,850	1,805	1,382	1,199	1,292
Female	47	86	69	149	278	303	260	193	162	209

Source: Calculated from figures provided by *Criminal Statistics*, England and Wales.

From: Williams (2004: 470)

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