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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FEMALE VIOLENT STREET CRIME

*Deborah Baskin, Ira Sommers and Jeffrey Fagan**

I. Introduction

Ten years after the U.S. Attorney General's Task Force on Violent Crime considered problems of violence in the United States,¹ and on the heels of a National Academy Sciences report on violence,² the nation seems poised to begin a new "war on violence." Past "wars" on crime problems, including the recently stalemated "war on drugs" have focused primarily on males. This one promises to be no different. Violence continues to be viewed as the province of young males in urban areas.³ According to the Uniform Crime Reports,⁴ over 75% of homicide victims in 1990 were males, and over 85% of homicide and aggravated assault arrestees were males. The risks of violent victimization are highest in urban areas where there also are the highest concentrations of poverty, residential mobility, single males, young persons, unemployment, racial heterogeneity and segregation, racial minorities, and other social correlates of violence.⁵ And the higher rates of violent victimization among violent offenders suggests that these factors are similarly concentrated in urban areas for violent behaviors.

Our research has led us to the conclusion that women in New York City are becoming more and more likely to involve themselves in violent street crime. This essay analyzes the developing role of women in violent street crime and poses a model, based on both historical analy-

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1. See UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, ATTORNEY GENERAL'S TASK FORCE ON VIOLENT CRIME (1982).

2. See A.J. REISS, JR., & J.A. ROTH, UNDERSTANDING AND CONTROLLING VIOLENCE 1 (1992).

3. See K.D. HARRIES, SERIOUS VIOLENCE (1992); REISS & ROTH, *supra*, note 2.

4. See FED. BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES (1991).

5. See ROBERT SAMPSON, *Individual and Community Factors in Violent Offending and Victimization*, in A.J. REISS & J.A. ROTH, 2 UNDERSTANDING AND CONTROLLING VIOLENCE (forthcoming, 1993).

sis and empirical research, to explain the participation of women in violent street crime in the 1980s.

Unlike the outcry over street crime committed by males, concerns about women and violence have centered primarily on their roles as *victims* of sexual and physical violence committed by strangers and by males in intimate relationships. When women do commit violent crimes, though, their behaviors are considered doubly deviant. Because violent behavior is concentrated among males, it is confounded with gender roles. Accordingly, women who commit violent acts are violating their sex roles as well as the criminal law.⁶ As a result, it seems that assaults and homicides by women still are considered a sideshow, rare acts that are expressive acts of revenge or self-protection in contrast to the predatory or instrumental acts of violence committed by males. Rarely is violence by women considered in the development or testing of theories of aggression.⁷

Recent trends and studies suggest that these omissions may seriously bias both research and theory on violence. Although women are arrested less often for violence, they disproportionately are victims of homicide, particularly in intimate relationships.⁸ Research on women who kill abusive male partners suggests that violent events are bound up in the complex dynamics of specific situations and contexts.⁹ Self-reports suggest that adult women are equally as likely as males to participate in spouse assault, although they more often suffer injuries at the hands of male partners.¹⁰ But the same data also show that female participation rates for violence toward *any* partner (strangers or spouses) equals rates for males and are concentrated in cities.¹¹

6. See C. KRUTTSCHNITT, *Gender Differences In Violent Behavior*, in A.J. REISS & J.A. ROTH, 2 UNDERSTANDING AND CONTROLLING VIOLENCE (forthcoming, 1993); A. CAMPBELL, *WOMEN IN PRISON* (1990); Deborah R. Baskin et al., *Role Incongruence and Gender Variation in the Provision of Prison Mental Health Services*, 30 J. HEALTH & SOC. BEHAV. 305-14 (1989).

7. See KRUTTSCHNITT, *supra* note 6.

8. See Angela Browne and K.R. Williams, *Exploring the Effects of Resource Availability and the Likelihood of Female-Perpetrated Homicides*, 23 L. & SOC'Y REV. 75-94 (1989).

9. See ANGELA BROWNE, *WHEN BATTERED WOMEN KILL* (1987).

10. See M.A. STRAUSS & R. GELLES, *PHYSICAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN FAMILIES: RISK FACTORS AND ADAPTATIONS TO VIOLENCE IN 8,145 FAMILIES* (1990); JEFFREY A. FAGAN & ANGELA BROWNE, *Violence Toward Spouses And Intimates*, in A.J. REISS & J.A. ROTH, 2 UNDERSTANDING AND CONTROLLING VIOLENCE (forthcoming, 1993).

11. See JEFFREY A. FAGAN, *Social Structure And Spouse Assault*, in B. FOREST, *THE SOCIO-ECONOMICS OF CRIME AND JUSTICE* (forthcoming, 1993); JEFFREY A. FAGAN, *Do Criminal Sanctions Deter Drug Offenders?*, in *DRUGS AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM* (C. Uchida & D. McKenzie eds., forthcoming, 1993).

Among inner city teenagers, males report higher rates of robbery and aggravated assault, but among active offenders, rates for males and females are equally high.¹² Girls participate in gangs less often than males, but once in gangs their participation and frequency of violence once again differs little from male gang members.¹³

These changing patterns of violent street crime committed by women raise important questions. First, is women's involvement in violent street crime so insignificant that social science and public policy can ignore it? Second, can we continue to believe that the influences pulling male inner city residents toward crime and delinquency somehow bypass the women in these communities? This essay addresses these questions by reporting on a body of research being developed, both jointly and separately, by the authors. Part II discusses some of the trends in inner city women's participation in violent street crime by using New York City (NYC) as a case study. Part III proposes a model for understanding some of these patterns. Part IV concludes with a consideration of some of the implications of the ideas presented in this paper for the criminal justice system, especially as they concern the notion of "fairness."

II. Trends in Women's Participation in Violent Street Crime

Our interest in women's involvement in violent street crime was initially piqued when we noted the following story in our neighborhood newspaper:

A 34 year old . . . woman is in stable condition after being shot in the face during a robbery Monday night . . . a couple of doors from her home. . . Two. . . women, a 24 year old and a 26 year old . . . were arrested and charged with attempted murder, robbery, assault and criminal possession of a weapon in connection with the shooting and robbery, said police.

She was approached from behind by two women, said police, who shot her, took her wallet containing \$320 in cash and fled. . . The victim's property and two guns—a 380 automatic, which was found on one of the suspects, and a 22 caliber starter's pistol, found nearby—were recovered.¹⁴

Curious about whether this event involving women robbers was idiosyncratic, or whether we were guilty of gender blindness (or, worse, assuming that all criminals are male) when reading the crime stories

12. See JEFFREY A. FAGAN, *Drug Use and Delinquency Among Urban Gangs*, in C. RONALD HUFF, *GANGS IN AMERICA* (1990).

13. Telephone Interviews with Dr. Anne Campbell (1991); see Fagan, *supra*, note 12.

14. See THE PARK SLOPE PAPER (1989).

that appear in the newspaper, we began to make mental notes concerning the gender issue. We began to notice newspaper items in which women were reported to be the offenders in violent street events.

We then turned to police and court data in order to get a better idea of some of the trends and patterns of women's involvement in violent street crime, again to explore what had seemed to us to be a hidden or neglected aspect of urban crime. Thus, we obtained arrest counts by crime type for the years 1987-1990 in New York City. The data on arrests for murder/manslaughter, robbery, aggravated assault, and burglary¹⁵ were aggregated from raw data made available by the New York City Police Department in the form of arrest counts by crime type, race and age subgroups, and year (1987-1990). In conjunction with population estimates from the census (1987 and 1990), race-age and crime specific arrest rates were constructed for the years 1987-1990. To adjust for potential year-to-year variations in reporting and recording practices, a four year average rate was computed to stabilize random fluctuations, a practice followed in previous research.¹⁶ Additional data came from the arraignment calendars and official court records of 266 women arrested and charged for a violent felony in the borough of Manhattan, New York City from January through June, 1990.¹⁷ The results of these varying data constructions are discussed in the following paragraphs.

In light of our interest in understanding the social and economic ecology of gender and crime, we explored variations in participation by race and sex. When arrest rates for violent crimes were classified by race and sex, a number of important patterns emerged. First, the rates of offending were significantly higher for black and hispanic males. Second, the rates for black women were more proximate to those of white males. In fact, the arrest rates for robbery and aggravated assault were higher for black females than for white males. Across all of the crime categories, the rates for black females were substantially higher than those for hispanic and white females. Third, the rates for hispanic females fell in-between those for black females

15. First and second degree burglary are classified as violent felonies in New York State. New York Penal Law § 140.00 (1993).

16. See Robert Sampson, *Neighborhood and Crime: The Structural Determinants of Personal Victimization*, 22 J. RES. CRIME & DELINQ., 7-40 (1985); E.A. Allan and Darrell Steffensmeier, *Youth, Underemployment, and Property Crime*, 54 AM. SOC. REV. 107-23 (1989).

17. For a detailed discussion of this research, See Ira Sommers & Deborah Baskin, *The Situational Context of Violent Female Offending*, — J. RES. CRIME & DELINQ. (forthcoming, 1993).

and white males and white females. In sharp contrast, the rates of offending for white females were far below the five other subgroups.

Further comparisons of violent offending rates were made for sex-race-age subgroups. In the case of robbery, the rate for black females less than fifteen years old was substantially higher than the equivalent rate for white males (596 compared to 162). The robbery offending rates between the two subgroups were fairly consistent across the other age categories. The same pattern was evident for assault. Black females less than fifteen years old were far more involved in assault than their white male counterparts (298 compared to 148). Older black females (25-29) also had higher rates of involvement than similarly aged white males.

The comparisons of the offending rates in the present study produced a picture largely consistent with the few extant analyses of race differences in female arrest rates.¹⁸ The findings clearly indicate the disparity in the relative rates of offending among black, hispanic and white females. Both black and hispanic females exhibit high rates of violence relative to white females. The criminal violence of black females, however, is substantially higher than both hispanic and white females. Why do black females exhibit such relatively high rates of violence?

Returning to our initial curiosity concerning the impact of inner city structures on crime and delinquency, we analyzed official arrest histories by place of residence for 266 women arrested in New York City (i.e., Manhattan) for violent felonies. We assigned every offender a 1990 census tract code based on their address at the time of their instant offense.¹⁹ Census tracts were classified in terms of the percentage of families living below the poverty threshold. Places with *low* concentrations of poverty are tracts where less than 20% of the families have incomes below the poverty threshold, *moderate* concentrations of poverty are tracts where 20-30% of the families have incomes below the poverty threshold, and *high* concentrations of poverty are tracts where more than 30% of the families have incomes below the poverty threshold.

Our preliminary findings indicate that the concentration of poverty is associated positively with the level of criminal activity. The mean

18. See R. Chilton & S. Datesman, *Gender, Race, and Crime: An Analysis of Urban Arrest Trends, 1960-1980*, 1 GENDER & SOC'Y 152-71 (1987); G. Hill and E. Crawford, *Women, Race, and Crime*, 28 CRIMINOLOGY 601-23 (1990); John Laub & J.M. McDermott, *An Analysis of Serious Crime by Young Black Women*, 23 CRIMINOLOGY 81-98 (1985).

19. We used the most recent address since this location compared positively with other neighborhoods identified in their residential histories.

number of official arrests for robbery, assault, burglary, and total violent felonies were significantly higher for women from high concentration of poverty neighborhoods than for their counterparts in the two other neighborhood subgroups. Significant differences in arrests for these violent crimes among the three neighborhood subgroups remained even after controlling for age, education, marital status, and race. The data also show that 69% of the black female offenders lived in areas characterized by high concentrations of poverty, whereas only 20% and 11% of hispanic and white women, respectively, lived in such neighborhoods. These results suggest that regardless of race, women from high concentration of poverty neighborhoods are involved disproportionately in violent crime. Black women, however, are significantly more likely to reside in these neighborhoods as compared to hispanic or white females. Consequently, it is not surprising to find higher levels of black female involvement in non-domestic violent crimes.

Although it might not be surprising, it is not clear *how* residence in areas characterized by high concentrations of poverty influences women's decisions to participate in crime. Such an understanding requires an exploration of the dynamic processes and structural and economic changes that shape everyday life in New York City's underclass communities.

III. A Model for Understanding the Social Ecology of Women's Participation in Violent Street Crime

Our research points to a set of processes that seem to pull inner city women into violent street crime. Within a community context characterized by economic and social dislocation, growing drug markets and a marked disappearance of males, situational factors related to family, school and peer relations combine to create social and economic opportunity structures open to women's increasing participation in violent crime.

A. Economic and Social Dislocation

Basic economic shifts and transformations are important for understanding the changes in the life experiences of poor urban minorities, including the oft-neglected woman. Wilson²⁰ argues that one of the major factors involved in the growth of ghetto poverty is industrial restructuring (shift from goods-producing to service-producing indus-

20. W.J. WILSON, THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED: THE INNER CITY, THE UNDERCLASS, AND PUBLIC POLICY (1987).

tries, relocation of manufacturing industries out of the central city) and labor-market swings (polarization of the labor market into low-wage and high-wage sectors, wage stagnation, periodic recessions).²¹ Another factor is the outmigration of higher income residents from certain parts of the inner city, resulting in a higher concentration of residents in extreme poverty or living in ghetto neighborhoods.²²

A report from the New York Community Service Society found that 70% of the city's poor blacks and hispanics live in neighborhoods where 30% or *more* of the residents are poor. On the other hand, 70% of the city's poor whites live in neighborhoods where *less than* 30% of the residents are poor.²³ Under these conditions, "networks of kin, friends and associates are more likely to include a higher proportion of individuals who, because of their experiences with extreme economic marginality, tend to doubt that they can achieve approved societal goals."²⁴ Severely limited in terms of job networks, education, and skills, young ghetto men and women have little chance to participate in the regular economy. The jobs that do exist for them are usually low paying, low status or many miles away.

Single parenthood and government cuts in social service benefits also contribute to the increasing marginalization of many women. Between 1970 and 1985, the proportion of black children living in mother-only families increased from 30 to 51%,²⁵ primarily because large proportions of black mothers never married (up from 6 to 25%). Black women are less likely to marry because of their male-to-female-ratio disadvantage with black men and thus are more likely to be responsible for their own economic support. The chance that a black child will experience poverty is almost 90% if he or she lives in a family headed by a single women under age thirty.²⁶ Thus, for many young women in inner city neighborhoods, economic marginalization is compounded by anxieties concerning their ability to adequately fulfill the social role of mother as well as consumer. These anxieties have heightened during the past decade, in part because of declining access

21. *See id.*

22. *See id.*

23. *See E. TOBIER, THE CHANGING FACE OF POVERTY: TRENDS IN NEW YORK CITY'S POPULATION IN POVERTY, 1960-1990* (1984).

24. W.J. Wilson, *Studying Inner-city Social Dislocation*, 56 AM. SOC. REV. 1, 11 (1991).

25. *See P. GLICK, Demographic Pictures Of Black Families, in BLACK FAMILIES* (Harriet McAdoo ed., 1988).

26. *See J.T. GIBBS, YOUNG, BLACK, AND MALE IN AMERICA: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES* (1988).

to financial assistance and the failure of welfare payments to be indexed to inflation.

In the wake of structural and cultural resource depletion, an atmosphere of distrust, alienation and crime pervades ghetto neighborhoods.²⁷ One of the most important institutions that has become a casualty of these changes is the relationship between "female old heads" and young girls.²⁸ Traditionally, the "female old heads" served as important community role models. These women believed in hard work, family life and "repeatedly and insistently told attentive boys and girls 'what was good for them'."²⁹ But as meaningful employment has become increasingly scarce and drugs and crime have become institutionalized, the old head has lost prestige and authority.

With the expansion of the drug economy and its opportunities for "crazy money,"³⁰ street-smart girls (and boys) are concluding that the old head's lessons about life and the work ethic are no longer relevant. As family caretakers and role models disappear or decline in influence, and as unemployment and poverty become more persistent, girls looking for direction to achieve a more conventional life have little direct personal support. The informal social controls of neighborhoods that help to restrain female initiation into crime, particularly the traditional pattern of gender role socialization in which the activities of girls are often monitored more carefully than those of boys,³¹ have been eroded.

Within this context of economic marginality and reduced social regulation, new role models have emerged to compete with the traditional old heads. The new model for girls is often involved in the "high life," buying fancy clothes, jewelry, drugs, and alcohol.³² She may work at low-paying jobs or she may be on welfare. More likely, she makes ends meet, part time or full time, in the drug trade or in some other area of the underground economy.

The economic and cultural changes enumerated above are not the only factors relevant to female participation in violent street crime. The increased supply and demand for cocaine products, especially

27. See Bruce Johnson et al., *Drug Abuse Among the Inner City: Impact of Hard Drug Use and Sales on Low Income Communities*, in 13 DRUGS AND CRIME — CRIME AND JUSTICE, AN ANNUAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH (J.Q. Wilson & M. Tonry eds., 1990).

28. See E. ANDERSON, *STREETWISE: RACE, CLASS, CHANGE IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY* (1990).

29. Anderson, *supra*, note 28 at 4.

30. See T. WILLIAMS, *COCAINE KIDS* (1989).

31. See John Hagan et al., *Class In The Household: A Power-control Theory of Gender and Delinquency* 92 AM. J. SOC. 788-816 (1987).

32. See Anderson, *supra*, note 28.

crack, and the depletion of males in the twenty to thirty-five year age removed some of the barriers to female participation in street-level drug selling.

B. The Growth of Drug Markets

Drug dealing, especially when it involves the sale of crack, appears to have added substantially to the set of economic opportunities available to persons with weak legitimate earning opportunities. Crack emerged in New York City, in 1985, shortly after the use and sale of powdered cocaine reached its highest levels nationwide.³³ Most cocaine users had been aware of the intensified high experienced from smoking freebase cocaine.³⁴ However, quantities of cocaine sufficient for "basing" had been beyond the economic means of most drug users. An apparent reduction in the import price of cocaine in the mid-1980s made the raw material for smokable cocaine economically accessible to many users. Moreover, compared to the manufacture of freebase cocaine, the crack production process was cheaper, simpler, safer, and more efficient. Quickly, crack became widely available through decentralized street corner markets and crack houses with seemingly endless supplies. Similar to the use of the more expensive freebase form, compulsive crack use often developed following initiation into cocaine smoking.³⁵

The introduction of crack, and its popularity among a cohort of young adults with high base rates of drug use, created new demands that exceeded the capacity of established distribution systems. In turn, the expansion of the drug economy increased the opportunities for street-level drug selling through increased access to supplies, the availability of entry-level roles in drug distribution with a small capital investment, and the creation of "controlled" selling territories with guaranteed incomes.³⁶

33. See L. ZIMMER, *OPERATION PRESSURE POINT: THE DISRUPTION OF STREET-LEVEL DRUG TRADE ON NEW YORK'S LOWER EAST SIDE* (1987).

34. See R.K. Seigel, *Cocaine Smoking: Nature and Extent of Coca Paste and Cocaine Freebase Abuse*, in *COCAINE: A CLINICIAN'S HANDBOOK* (A.M. Washton & M. Gold eds., 1987).

35. See F.H. Gawin & H.D. Kleber, *Evolving Conceptualizations Of Cocaine Dependence*, 61 *YALE J. BIOLOGY & MED.* 121-36 (1988); Seigel, *supra*, note 34; H.I. SPITZ & J.S. ROSENCAN, *Cocaine Reconceptualized: Historical Overview*, in *COCAINE ABUSE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN TREATMENT AND RESEARCH* (1987).

36. See A. Hamid, *The Political Economy Of Crack-Related Violence*, 15 *CONTEMP. DRUG PROBS.*, 31-77 (1990); Johnson et al., *supra*, note 27; WILLIAMS, *supra*, note 30.

C. The Changing Composition of the Inner City

In order to understand *women's* participation in the various drug markets, two important trends regarding the disappearance of significant numbers of males from inner city neighborhoods need to be noted. First, the risks of violent death or injury associated with drug selling has resulted in a substantial increase in male mortality. Goldstein et al.,³⁷ for example, found that 32% of 414 homicide events in New York City were related primarily to crack sales.³⁸ Similarly, the District of Columbia Police Department³⁹ estimates that 50-80% of the killings in recent years have been drug-market related.⁴⁰

Second, the emergence of crack occurred in an era when crime control ideologies had shifted toward punishment, incapacitation, and retribution.⁴¹ Policy responses to the spread of crack focused on street-level law enforcement efforts using mass arrests to sweep low-level dealers and steerers off the streets. Between 1980 and 1988, the number of drug arrests in New York City increased from 18,521 (40% for heroin or other opiates) to 88,641 (44% for crack).⁴² Data on the criminal justice response to crack suggest that crack arrests are being treated more seriously than other comparable drug cases.⁴³ The results suggest that New York City crack cases had a higher probability of pretrial detention, felony indictment, and jail sentence.

The end result is that persons, primarily black and latino men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five,⁴⁴ convicted of drug sales, especially of crack, now constitute the largest proportion of all inmates entering jails and prisons in New York.⁴⁵ Thus, the risk of being incarcerated or seriously injured as a result of participation in the drug trade appears extremely high. Moreover, the high incidence of incarceration and homicide among young, inner city, minority males,

37. See P.J. Goldstein et al., *Crack and Homicide in New York City, 1989: A Conceptually-based Event Analysis*, 16 CONTEMPORARY DRUG PROBLEMS (1989).

38. See *id.*

39. See P. REUTER ET AL., MONEY FROM CRIME (1990).

40. See *id.* Other authors writing in this Symposium issue refer to drug-related crimes as being non-violent. We take the contrary position.

41. See ALFRED BLUMSTEIN ET AL., CRIMINAL CAREERS AND CAREER CRIMINALS (1986).

42. See NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS AND PLANNING, STATISTICAL REPORT: COMPLAINTS AND ARRESTS 1988 (1989).

43. See S. Belenko et al., *Crack and the Criminal Justice System*, 29 J. RES. CRIME AND DELINQ. 44-58 (1991).

44. See CORRECTIONAL ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK, IMPRISONED GENERATION: YOUNG MEN UNDER CRIMINAL JUSTICE CUSTODY IN NEW YORK STATE (1990).

45. See R. ROSS & M. COHEN, NEW YORK STATE TRENDS IN FELONY DRUG PROCESSING, 1983-1987 (1988).

in the wake of expanded demand for drugs, has provided an opportunity structure for female entry into the informal drug economy.⁴⁶

D. Situational Factors Related to Women's Pathways into Violent Street Crime

How is it that women come to enter the world of violent street crime, including drug distribution? A significant part of the literature on women and crime contends that women are "forced" into offending by males, drug addiction, victimization histories and the responsibilities of single parenthood.⁴⁷ By and large, these authors argue that domestic arrangements provide two important conduits through which women enter into criminal careers. When offending begins early in a woman's life, childhood victimization is viewed as the main cause of female offending. Since between 50% and 80% of women surveyed in various correctional institutions in the country report being victims of domestic violence,⁴⁸ a direct, causal relationship is posited between "the experience of being victimized and subsequent offending."⁴⁹ The chain of events leading to criminalization is then typically stated as beginning with child physical/sexual abuse, which produces a vicious cycle that includes running away, institutionalization, return to dysfunctional family unit, running away, and ultimately, street deviance (e.g., prostitution, drug use).

When initiation into offending occurs later in a woman's life, single parenthood is seen as another family-based pathway into offending. Given data documenting the large proportion of women offenders who are also mothers of young children, it is argued that women are driven into criminal activities by the responsibilities of single parenthood thrust upon them by the desertion of an uncaring and often abusive male partner.⁵⁰

46. See Goldstein et al., *supra*, note 37; P. REUTER ET AL., *MONEY FROM CRIME* (1990).

47. See Regina Arnold, *Processing Of Victimization And Criminalization Of Black Women*, 17 *SOC. JUST.* 153-66 (1990); CORRECTIONAL ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK, *supra*, note 44; TRACY HULING, *NEW YORK GROUPS CALL ON STATE LAWMAKERS TO RELEASE WOMEN IN PRISON* (1991); ELEANOR MILLER, *STREET WOMAN* (1986); JOYCELYN POLLACK-BYRNE, *WOMEN, PRISON AND CRIME* (1990); Helen Stone, *The Changing Pattern Of Female Crime: A Police Perspective*, in *THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM* (I. Moyer ed., 1985); MARGUERITE WARREN, *COMPARING FEMALE AND MALE OFFENDERS* (1981); RALPH WEISHEIT & SUE MAHAN, *WOMEN, CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE* (1988).

48. See UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS, *WOMEN IN PRISON* (1991).

49. See Arnold, *supra*, note 47.

50. See CORRECTIONAL ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK, *supra*, note 44; Strat Douthat, *Holiday Season Brings The Blues To Incarcerated Mothers*, *THE BRUNSWICK NEWS*,

When pathways stray from home, drug use itself has been said to lead women into criminal careers.⁵¹ The argument is that heavy involvement as a drug abuser reduces the options for women to engage in other income producing endeavors. Therefore, illegal activities provide women with opportunities to make enough money in order to buy drugs.

Nonetheless, whether the pathway to crime is through domestic networks or substance abuse, the literature fails to explore the sometimes violent work that accompanies criminal enterprise. Typically, when women are involved in violent street crimes, they are portrayed as accomplices, frequently acting as look-outs while men engage in the violent aspects of the event. Or, women are portrayed as playing passive roles, simply as holders and/or users of illegally obtained property or drugs. A third scenario constructs female involvement in violent street crime as limited to brow wiping, standing by their violent, law violating men to offer support services. These support services have been identified as ranging from fraudulent check cashing, prostitution and other gendered types of criminal involvement to providing sex, food, and family for the criminally active male members of domestic and boyfriend networks.⁵²

This persistent emphasis on women's "forced" initiation into crime has produced a paradigm that excludes the possibility that initiation into *violent* offending for inner city women may, in fact, be linked to the same sets of variables as for men (e.g. peers, opportunity structures, neighborhood effects). Embedded in our research,⁵³ as well as in

1988, at 2; R. GLICK & V. NETO, NATIONAL STUDY OF WOMEN'S CORRECTIONAL PROGRAMS (1977); Setta Moss, *Women In Prison: A Case Of Pervasive Neglect*, 5 WOMEN & THERAPY 5 (1986); NCADV VOICE, NATIONAL ESTIMATES AND FACTS ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE (1989); L. Roman, *Jailed Mothers Risk Losing Their Kids*, NEW DIRECTIONS FOR WOMEN, Mar./Apr. 1990, at 12; William Sack et al., *The Children Of Imprisoned Parents: A Psychosocial Exploration*, 46 AM. J. ORTHOPSYCHIATRY 626 (1976).

51. See Arnold, *supra*, note 47; HULING, *supra*, note 47.

52. See PATRICIA ADLER, WHEELING AND DEALING: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF AN UPPER-LEVEL DEALING AND SMUGGLING COMMUNITY (1985); M. Blom & T. Van Den Berg, *A Typology Of The Life And Work Styles Of 'Heroin-Prostitutes'*, in GROWING UP GOOD; POLICING THE BEHAVIOR OF GIRLS IN EUROPE (M. Cain ed., 1989); MILLER, *supra*, note 47; Darrell Steffensmeier, *Organization Properties And Sex-Segregation In The Underworld: Building A Sociological Theory Of Sex Differences In Crime*, 61 SOC. FORCES 1010-32 (1983).

53. See DEBORAH BASKIN & IRA SOMMERS, THE CRIMINAL CAREERS OF VIOLENT FEMALE OFFENDERS (research gathered pursuant to a grant from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, 1990-1991) (copy on file with authors); JEFFREY A. FAGAN, *Drug Selling and Licit Income in Distressed Neighborhoods: The Economic Lives of Drug Users and Drug Dealers In Inner Cities*, in DRUGS, CRIME AND SOCIAL ISOLATION (A.V. Harrell & G.E. Paterson eds., 1992).

other related studies,⁵⁴ there is growing evidence that women's initiation into crime may be much more varied than the partial picture of male dependency that has been painted thus far.

Scattered throughout the literature are significant examples of young girls and women acting out of self-determination and not in concert with or for boyfriends. In a study of female gang organizations, Campbell⁵⁵ found that girl gang membership is not an outgrowth of boyfriend gang membership.⁵⁶ To the contrary, Campbell argues that girl gang members are suspicious of those who would join for romantic reasons and, as a result, express hostility when attempts are made to integrate girlfriends into their ranks.⁵⁷ Furthermore, she argues that girl gangs regulate their own organizations and reject attempts by male gang leaders to interfere in their operations.⁵⁸ And the research has indicated that girls in gangs are involved in a wide variety of criminal activities, many of which include fighting, weapons and other violent encounters.⁵⁹

Moreover, our current research confirms our initial sense that women in inner city neighborhoods are being pulled toward violent street crime by the same forces that have been found to affect their male counterparts. As with males, neighborhood, peer and addiction factors have been found to contribute to female initiation into criminal violence. Weak school attachments and parental supervision, associations with delinquent peers as well as other social and economic processes (e.g. relative deprivation, increased opportunities for illegal activities, decrease in conventional role models) prevalent in severely distressed communities, combine with individual level and situational factors to initiate involvement in violent street crime.

By and large, the women in our studies grew up in multiproblem households where the absence of conventional role models, social support and material resources weakened the socialization functions of the family. They experienced detachment from conventional institutions, such as school, marriage and employment. By adulthood, most of these women were deeply entrenched in substance abuse and re-

54. See D. Anglin & Y. Hser, *Addicted Women And Crime*, 25 *CRIMINOLOGY* 359-97 (1987); Blom & Van De Berg, *supra*, note 52; CAMPBELL, *supra*, note 6; PAT CARLEN, *WOMEN, CRIME AND POVERTY* (1988); D. Hunt et al., *Patterns Of Criminal Activity Among Methadone Clients And Current Narcotics Users Not In Treatment*, 14 *J. DRUG ISSUES* 687-702 (1984).

55. See *supra*, note 6.

56. See *id.*

57. See *id.*

58. See *id.*

59. See BASKIN & SOMMERS, *supra*, note 53; CAMPBELL, *supra*, note 6; CARLEN, *supra*, note 54.

lated deviant lifestyles. The end result of these processes seems to be pathways to violent street offending for a relatively newer, younger and more heavily addicted group of people—women. Indeed, with the continuing decline in the quality of life in severely distressed communities, poor women are fast on their way to becoming one of the most rapidly growing and resilient segments of the offender population.⁶⁰

IV. Conclusion

The growing concentration of poverty, joblessness and family disruption has signaled a transformation in the social and institutional structure of the inner city. In turn, there has been a general weakening in the structures of economic opportunities and processes of social sanctions that have limited the development of social and economic capital for inner city residents. Neighborhood change has weakened formal and informal social controls, and the material and social rewards for legal behavior have all but disappeared. In this milieu, young people in inner cities have become involved in a variety of serious and potentially lethal criminal activities, including drug selling. This involvement reached unprecedented numbers in the 1980s. Many of the participants were, at one time, employed, skilled workers, while others were unemployed or unskilled workers, and still others already were active in illegal enterprises before the expansion of drug markets. In neighborhoods with active drug markets and few attractive opportunities for legitimate income, opportunities for drug selling may have attracted young workers from lower paying jobs in the formal economy, provided work for young people detached from labor markets, and offered higher incomes or income supplements to workers already active in the both the licit and illicit sectors of the informal economy. Women, especially, may consider drug trading as a good opportunity given the dwindling number of males in the inner city.

Our ongoing research suggests that these processes, so often identified as criminogenic in terms of inner city males, affects women living in these communities as well. For both men and women in a changing economy, filling the market niche for drug products or other illegal goods is a logical entrepreneurial response, particularly when the historical avenues to labor market participation have been truncated by the restructuring of the city and regional economy. The informal economy grew disproportionately in the 1980s in New York neighbor-

60. See Sommers & Baskin, *supra*, note 17.

hoods with high concentrations of poor, minority populations,⁶¹ and drug selling has always been an important part of the informal economy.⁶² The growth in drug use and the rapid expansion of the cocaine and crack markets in the 1980s created a complex drug industry, albeit one that functioned outside formal (legal) systems of regulation and that relied on violence for its maintenance.⁶³ Drawn by the promise of high profits with minimal capital investment, drug sellers became suppliers of important goods and services to both local markets and residents of more affluent areas.⁶⁴ Thus, the vitality of a drug market in a neighborhood is bound up with the relationships within poor neighborhoods and between these neighborhoods and other parts of their cities. To the extent that women's roles and prominence have changed in transformed neighborhoods, their involvement in drug selling and other crimes that include street violence reflects the dynamics of the neighborhoods themselves.

The societal response to crime problems arguably borne from social and economic conditions has been the traditional "crackdown," rooted in deterrence and punishment theories. The anti-crime crusades of the 1980s have translated into laws and policies that rely heavily on criminal sanctions, especially incarceration. For instance, sentences for drug offenders in New York City in 1983-86 reflected ideological trends that regard punishment as both symbolic and substantive components of anti-drug sentiment.⁶⁵ The enactment and popularization of laws mandating incarceration, regardless of their enforcement, symbolized public contempt for both users and sellers,⁶⁶ while the mobilization of legal institutions to punish drug offenders reflected public will to wage "war" against drug users.

Whatever the successes of the symbolic component of crime control policy, its specific deterrent effects evidently are quite limited for cer-

61. See S. Sassen-Koob, *New York City's Informal Economy*, in *THE INFORMAL ECONOMY: STUDIES IN ADVANCED AND LESS DEVELOPED COUNTRIES* (A. Portes et al. eds., 1989).

62. See FAGAN, *supra*, note 53.

63. See Paul Goldstein, *Drugs And Violent Crime*, in *PATHWAYS TO CRIMINAL VIOLENCE* (N.A. Weiner & M.E. Wolfgang eds., 1989). The markets themselves reflected differences in the types of drugs and their psychoactive effects: compared to heroin and marijuana street sales, cocaine and crack markets were more volatile due to the high rate of transactions and the short half-life of the high they produced. P. Bourgois, *In Search Of Horatio Alger: Culture And Ideology In The Crack Economy*, 16 *CONTEMP. DRUG PROBS.* 619-50 (1989); Hamid, *supra*, note 36; Johnson et al., *supra*, note 27.

64. See Mercer Sullivan, *Crime And The Social Fabric*, in *THE DUAL CITY* (J. Moltenkopf & M. Castells eds., 1991).

65. See FAGAN, *supra*, note 11.

66. See M. Myers, *Symbolic Policy And The Sentencing Of Drug Offenders*, 23 *L. & SOC'Y REV.* 295-315 (1989).

tain subgroups of offenders; especially for those who were involved in the large and active drug market in New York in the 1980s. For both male and female crack arrestees in 1986, prison sentences were as likely as probation terms, regardless of the defendant's prior record or severity of the drug arrest.⁶⁷ But the sentences appear to have been largely ineffective in deterring drug-related activity. Recidivism for either a drug or violent offense was as likely to occur among drug offenders sentenced to prison as among those placed on probation.⁶⁸ The same results might easily be achieved by chance. The limited effect of incarceration for all types of drug offenders calls into question the fairness and validity of mandatory prison sentences for drug offenders.

The cost of the societal policy of incarceration falls most heavily on communities already burdened by the deterioration of local economies, the flight of economic opportunities from the surrounding region, and the expansion of drug markets and the violence that sustains them. These communities and their residents live with the effects of political economic decisions over which they have little control. These decisions include not only the allocation and policies of legal institutions, but also decisions regarding schools, zoning, and local services. The results raise doubts about the implied econometric model of specific deterrence that does not consider non-legal factors.⁶⁹

The exclusive focus on deterrence in the supply side of crime control policy discounts important factors that are part of the natural process of desistance from crime, drug use and drug selling. This focus also discounts the economic context of decisions to persist or desist from crime. Mounting a specific deterrent effect in the face of widespread drug involvement, for example, may be an insurmountable challenge for legal institutions. The relocation of sentencing discretion from judges to the legislature, and in turn to prosecutors through their charging decisions, has achieved a uniformity in sentencing that serves political goals but adds little to the deterrent effect of punishment. Can we reasonably expect to jail all drug offenders? The weak effects of punishment may have counterdeterrent effects that breed disrespect for the laws and institutions that the punishments are designed to uphold. The enforcement of ineffective laws undermines respect for legal institutions more generally, reinforcing the illicit economies and their influence on social controls within neighborhoods. The challenge for policy-makers is to contribute to

67. See Belenko et al., *supra*, note 43.

68. See FAGAN, *supra*, note 11.

69. See, e.g., MILLER, *supra*, note 47.

the processes that motivate offenders to stop. This requires a balanced policy that addresses both punishment for law violation and efforts to revalue the gains from legal behaviors.

The limited choices for punishment present an opportunity for balanced policy. The current reliance on the extremes of incarceration and probation offer little substantive choice for judges and policy makers. A range of sanctions makes sense. For offenders, interventions are needed that increase human capital — job skills and education — and that are part of the mix of pressures and escape paths that also characterize desistance from crime and drug use. Expanding the options for sentencing might restore a more rational allocation of punishments that recognizes the varying thresholds and reactivity of offenders to sanctions. Finally, legal doctrines will be ineffective unless sanctions are accompanied by related policies that emphasize the conditions in which deterrence becomes effective — conditions that both provide and revalue legal opportunities for financial gain, increase the costs of illicit gain, and reduce the opportunities for crime. That these concerns apply equally to men and women attest to the new dynamics of crime where gender is a far less salient factor.

