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# Effects of Abuse on Female Offenders

## **Abstract**

Between 1995 and 2005, the number of female offenders increased significantly. However, studies show that most female offenders do not commit violent crimes. Researchers have established that women that have experienced some form of abuse causes them to offend. Although women do not commit violent crimes, they still receive severe punishments. Incarceration is not a solution for reform and courts should consider the effects of abuse on female offenders. This paper illustrates how the effects of abuse correlates with female offenders, describes the effects of abuse on male offenders and how it relates to female offenders, and provides additional risk factors that can lead to a woman's pathway towards criminality. Additionally, this paper will provide policy implications for women offenders that have experienced abuse in their lifetime.

## **Keywords**

female offenders, male offenders, physical and sexual abuse

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**Abstract**

Between 1995 and 2005, the number of female offenders increased significantly. However, studies show that most female offenders do not commit violent crimes. Researchers have established that women that have experienced some form of abuse causes them to offend. Although women do not commit violent crimes, they still receive severe punishments. Incarceration is not a solution for reform and courts should consider the effects of abuse on female offenders. This paper illustrates how the effects of abuse correlates with female offenders, describes the effects of abuse on male offenders and how it relates to female offenders, and provides additional risk factors that can lead to a woman's pathway towards criminality. Additionally, this paper will provide policy implications for women offenders that have experienced abuse in their lifetime.

## **Introduction**

According to Johnson and Lynch (2013), the rates of incarcerated women have rapidly increased over the years. Between 1995 and 2005, the number of female offenders doubled (Johnson & Lynch, 2013). Although women make up a smaller percentage of the prison population when compared to men, previous studies show that the majority of incarcerated women did not commit violent crimes. Scholars have found that the effect of abuse throughout a woman's lifetime plays a significant role in future offending. According to a study conducted in 2005 with 100 female inmates, 90% experienced interpersonal violence and 50% had been sexually molested as a child (Johnson & Lynch, 2013). Interpersonal violence (IPV) includes sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and partner violence (Johnson & Lynch, 2013). Johnson and Lynch (2013) note that female prisoners report higher rates of IPV than women in the general population do. Overall, women who experienced physical or sexual abuse in their life have a higher risk of committing a crime.

Although there has been a great amount of research on women's violence and offending, the issue continues to evolve. Society rarely talks about violence perpetuated by women and how to prevent it. This is an issue that society needs to be aware of in order to support these women. Furthermore, courts do not take the brutally extensive abuse that many female offenders have experienced into consideration. Courts only acknowledge the crime and women receive the most severe punishment. Most incarcerated women have been physically or sexually assaulted; the majority having experienced both more than once, yet the assault is not introduced in court (Johnson & Lynch, 2013). In addition, studies have shown that the perpetrators of these types

of assaults either receive minor jail time or are not convicted. Scholars have also associated women's violence with mental illness, which is not considered in the decision-making process of their sentencing. The purpose of this paper is to review how the effects of abuse coincide with female offenders, examine the effects of abuse on male offenders and how it compares to female offenders, and explain additional risk factors that can lead to a woman's pathway to criminality.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Physical, Sexual Abuse and Female Offenders**

Recent studies have found that physical and sexual abuse can have long-term implications, including future offending by the victims. Asscher and colleagues (2005) conducted a study that included 3,502 female juveniles aged 12 to 18. A trained probation officer performed a Washington State Juvenile Court Assessment (WSJCA) in interview form on the female juveniles and their families. The study concluded that 61% of the female juveniles had a history of physical or sexual abuse or both. In addition, it found that the female juveniles mostly committed misdemeanors against persons. Lastly, it found that the female juveniles with histories of physical abuse expressed violent behavior (Asscher, Put, & Stams, 2005). Similarly, Schaffner (2007) researched female juvenile delinquents and observed that girls who had been physically assaulted fight back to protect themselves. This could be an answer to Asscher and colleagues' findings (2005) mentioned above, on female juveniles committing misdemeanors against persons. Belknap and Holsinger (2006) also conducted a study on female juvenile delinquents, in which the group was asked if their abuse led to them committing a crime. According to Belknap and Holsinger

(2006), more than half of the girls believed that the abuse they experienced caused them to offend.

Women or girls who experienced some form of abuse have a higher risk of committing crimes, but the reasons behind the specific crimes they commit differ. For instance, if a girl is sexually abused at home, she runs away in search of a family (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006). The criminal justice system sees running away as offending. Another example is when a woman has children and does not have money to feed them, she will steal to provide necessities for them. This contributed to the findings of Sondheimer (2001), who noted that when female incarceration rates were high, it was due to robbery. Sometimes these women depend on their partner for financial resources, but cannot go to them because they will abuse them. Another example of domestic violence is when women fight back against their partners because they have had enough of the abuse. According to Henning and colleagues (2006), after mandatory arrest laws were put into place, there was an increase in women offenders for domestic abuse. Overall, a large number of the women or girls in these studies became offenders because of the abuse they endured.

### **Effects of Abuse on Male Offenders Compared to Female Offenders**

Scholars have also examined the effects of abuse on male offenders and compared them to female offenders. Martin and colleagues (2008) conducted a study on incarcerated youths in an urban, Midwestern city. The study included 363 juveniles, aged 10 to 16 (Martin, Martin, Dell, Davis, & Guerrieri, 2008). The objective of this study was to investigate if identifying specific characteristics of these juveniles could prevent future delinquency. The study concluded that male and female

offenders reported being physically or sexually abused. The male offenders committed multiple crimes, resulting in continually re-entering the detention center. Both groups reported feeling depressed because of the abuse they experienced and juveniles who were physically abused admitted that they sometimes wanted to hurt someone (Martin et al., 2008). Martin and colleagues (2008) explained the majority of both groups at the detention center had committed crimes of assault.

Although the purpose of Belknap and Holsinger's 2006 study was different, they found similar results as Martin and colleagues (2008). Belknap and Holsinger (2006) noticed that girls reported a higher rate of abuse, however, the rate was still high for boys. According to their study, two thirds of the boys and three quarters of the girls were physically abused. Physical abuse included behaviors like beating, choking, or burning (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006). They also found that one fifth of the boys and three fifths of the girls reported sexual abuse by someone unrelated to them. Additionally, one in twelve of the boys and one quarter of the girls said that a family member sexually abused them. Belknap and Holsinger (2006) defined sexual abuse as "unwanted sexual contact." Both groups identified that the abuse they experienced led them to offend, however, witnessing abuse in the family also played a role.

Based on these results, the majority of the boys and girls in these studies experienced some form of abuse. It could be inferred that the boys and girls who experienced physical abuse then committed crimes of assault. This shows that physical abuse can lead to future crimes of assault. In another study, the boys and girls were asked directly if the abuse they endured was a reason that they committed crimes (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006). Both of the groups agreed that past abuse was one of the reasons

that they offended. This is significant in that these studies show that not only are girls being victimized, but boys are as well. Society rarely talks about female victimization, and even less frequently about male victimization. Men and boys are not usually linked to being victims of crimes and are not seen as victims. It is important for society to understand that men can also be victims. However, recent studies have shown that victimization incidents are underreported. According to Sandoval and Baumgartner (2017), society needs to reconsider criminal behavior. These boys and girls are punished for crimes that they have experienced or witnessed as a child, which is what they have learned over the years by an authority figure. Scholars have found that children are often products of their environment; children who are exposed to violence and abuse are likely to repeat that cycle of violence (Bowles, 2012). The severe punishment that these boys and girls receive makes them feel like it is their fault for being abused.

### **Other Risk Factors**

Physical and sexual abuse are not the only risk factors that can lead to female offending. Many studies focus only on abuse; however, Bowles (2012) argues that there are additional risk factors associated with female offending. According to her study, other risk factors include witnessing violence, growing up with caregivers who neglected them, addiction to drugs and alcohol, or mental illness. Bowles (2012) explains that these factors influence physical and psychological wellbeing. Lev-Wiesel (2005) adds that these factors also have a negative impact on women's cognitive and emotional development. Bowles (2012) conducted a study on 60 women who were under the supervision of a maximum-security facility. The 60 women were selected randomly and interviewed individually. Some of the



issues brought up in the interviews were family history, victimization, and criminal history (Bowles, 2012). The study found that the women who experienced physical, sexual, or verbal abuse at an early age used drugs to cope with the abuse. It also found that women used drugs to cope with the death of a loved one, absence of a parent, and relative's addiction to substance abuse (2012). Because these women used drugs to cope with their problems, they became heavily addicted. The addiction led these women to offend in order to maintain their drug habits (Bowles, 2012). Most of these women started stealing and some of them engaged in sex work as well.

Other risk factors contribute to female criminality as well. One of these risk factors is witnessing domestic violence. When young women observe someone they love being abused, they start believing that abuse is normal. Another risk factor is the absence of a parent. Some of these young women do not have parental support or guidance, which makes them vulnerable to criminality. In Bowles' (2012) study, these women turned to drugs. In addition, some women are introduced to drugs at a young age, especially when their parents are already heavily addicted. As a result, some of the coping mechanisms that these women and girls used led them to offend. Aside from the issues they already have from abuse, these women and girls received severe punishment that did not account for these risk factors. Studies have shown that these women come out of prison mentally worse than when they entered.

### **Policy Implications**

According to Bloom and colleagues (2004), public policy was initially developed to guide the behavior of male offenders. Public policy has ignored women's lives and lacks written policies on the behavior of female offenders (Bloom,

Owen, & Covington, 2004). The study argues that gender-responsive programs are necessary because the pathways into criminality are different for women and men. It also explains that women's pathways are based on survival (2004). Sandoval and Baumgartner (2017) add that incarceration is not a solution for the reform of these particular individuals. Furthermore, Bush-Baskette (1999) proposes that drug treatment programs should also be emphasized.

First and foremost, the criminal justice system needs to view women's pathways toward criminality as a social and public health issue (Mullis, Cornille, Mullis, Huber, 2004), and understand that women's pathways are based on survival, which will play a key role in establishing programs. Reviewing the aforementioned studies, a woman's pathway towards criminality includes drug addiction, neglect, and physical, sexual, and verbal abuse.

According to Peterson (1999), emotional support for these women and girls is mandatory for their health and safety. Since the majority of physical, sexual, and verbal abuse happens in the home, programs for women should be located away from home. These women are forced to go through the trauma of abuse alone, especially in severe cases where the parents are abusing them or are addicted to drugs and alcohol.

The goal of these programs should be to prevent these women and girls from offending or re-offending in the future. The programs should include only women, aged 12 and up, who are experiencing these risk factors and are considering offending or have already offended. The program will recruit women by handing out flyers or posting information on social media. This program will last a year and a half; however, in order for these women to have a permanent position in the program, they will

have to attend the first three days. The program will have a sign-in sheet that the women are required to sign each day.

Funding becomes an issue because these programs are not seen as a priority in society. Since funding is an issue, this program is more for a neighborhood and can be held at the closest park or library. These women will be given assessments twice a month to see how far they have come. These assessments will be reviewed after the program is over and if there is no progress, the women will be asked to stay for the rest of the year to make it a two-year program.

These programs should focus on the histories of these women's lives. For instance, if a great number of the women in the program have been abused, it should focus on abuse. If the women acknowledge that they are not alone, then they will feel more comfortable talking about their histories with others. These programs will allow women to build relationships with other women and maybe re-build the trust that they have lost.

In addition, each individual will be assigned a mentor so that her issues are heard. These mentors could be people who are interning at programs that advocate for victims of abuse or whose studies focus on abused children. This mentor could serve as a Big Sister for the emotional support that these women require. The mentor will be required to meet with the individual once a week to evaluate how they are doing. According to Simmons (2008), this will potentially prevent women from turning to gangs to gain that emotional support.

Moreover, former female offenders who have experienced abuse and were successful in improving their lives will be asked to volunteer to speak in front of others. The former female offender will be able to share their stories and potentially transform the lives of the women in the program. Speakers like

these will be asked to come in and talk every two weeks, so that the women look forward to something new.

A therapist who specializes in abuse will also be asked to come and talk to the women once a month. Another therapist who specializes in substance abuse and addiction will come three times a month. Because some of these women's addiction to drugs forced them to steal or prostitute themselves, it is important for them to get some form of treatment.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is evident that women's incarceration rates are increasing rapidly. Men's incarceration rates have remained stable while female offenders continue to increase. Many studies have proven that physical and sexual abuse are predictors of future female offending. Society hardly mentions women's violence, and courts do not consider women's pathways toward criminality in the sentencing process. The majority of the crimes that women commit are not violent offenses. Studies have shown that women who were physically abused committed crimes of assault. The trauma that these women endured from the abuse has caused them to fight back.

Although women report getting physically and sexually abused more than men, studies have shown that abuse plays a role in male offending as well. Male offenders report physical and sexual abuse at lower rates than women, but the percentage for men is still high. In addition, Bowles (2012) established that there are other risk factors that lead to women offenders which consist of witnessing violence, growing up with caregivers who were absent in their lives, becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol, or experiencing mental illness. Women use drugs to cope with these experiences and eventually become addicted. Courts should focus on treatment for these women and girls, and

not incarceration. Policy implications should include gender-responsive programs because the pathways toward criminality are different for women and men.

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