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From Victims to Survivors to Offenders: Women's Routes of Entry and Immersion into Street Crime

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ABSTRACT. This study explores the patterns by which women enter into criminal activities by drawing upon in-depth life history interviews with a sample of 20 incarcerated women. The author constructs a conceptual framework for understanding the progression from victim to survivor to offender in the subjects' life histories. This framework shows that the best available options for escape from physical and sexual violence are often survival strategies which are criminal: i.e., running away from home, use of drugs, and the illegal street work required to survive as a runaway.

The women's own narratives are used to illustrate their views of themselves as survivors, not as victims, and their commitments to important relationships in their lives which explain their entry into and commitments to criminal activities. Women's responses to victimization and women's relational identities are seen as factors which both motivate and restrain women's criminal activities. The concept of immersion in street crime is offered as a more accurate term than criminal career in describing women's criminal histories.

Criminology literature has recently begun to focus on concepts such as "criminal career" and "career offender" suggesting that there may be discernible patterns in the criminal histories of offenders (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1986; Gottfredson & Hirschi,

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1988). Yet this literature, thus far, centers almost exclusively around *male* offenders. Little attention has been paid to questions such as *whether* there is such a thing as a *female* "criminal career" pattern and, if so, how that career begins and what shapes its contours. This study uses qualitative life history data from a sample of 20 incarcerated women, ages 20 to 41, to begin constructing a conceptual framework for understanding why and how some women enter illegal activities, and how they define their commitments and identities in relation to criminality.

This study will focus on women's personal accounts of the life events and socializing experiences which they perceive to be connected to their entry into and immersion in illegal activity. Special attention will be given to women's interpretations of female sex-roles and the role of victimization, as well as poverty and racism, in setting up the conditions which both compel and constrain women's criminal activities.

GENDER, RACE, AND CRIME

Women's patterns of criminal activity differ markedly from those of men both in the types and the amounts of crime they commit. A major gender difference is the very low rate of violent crime committed by women. Women comprise only 5.2% of all inmates in state and federal correctional facilities in the United States (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1989), represent approximately 17% of all persons arrested (Uniform Crime Reports, 1989; Sarri, 1987; Chesney-Lind, 1986), and are arrested for 11% of all violent crimes (Uniform Crime Reports, 1989; Chesney-Lind, 1986). The offenses for which women are arrested and incarcerated are primarily non-violent and minor property offenses: shoplifting, larceny, check or credit card fraud, prostitution, and drug possession (Nesbitt, 1985; Steffensmeier, 1982; Crites, 1976; Sarri, 1987; Uniform Crime Reports, 1989). When women do commit acts of violence, it is most likely against family members and in a context of self defense (GAO, 1979; Ward, Jackson & Ward, 1980; Browne, 1987).

Women's arrest and incarceration rates vary by race. For example, women of color are somewhat more likely than white women

to be arrested for crimes against persons and are more likely to be sentenced to jail or prison, resulting in minority group women representing more than half of the adult female inmate population nationwide (Lewis, 1981; Sarri, 1987). The majority of incarcerated women are young, poor, single mothers, and are disproportionately from minority groups (American Correctional Association, 1990). These groups of women are also disproportionately the *victims* of crime, particularly violent crimes such as rape (Sarri, 1987). Economic, social, and political marginality may well account for the overlap in membership in high-risk groups among women who are at risk of becoming both victims and offenders.

Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988) argue that before we can address the question of what explains the gender gap in crime rates, and in order to understand race and class differences among women offenders, we need much more in-depth descriptive information about women who engage in crime. While in recent years there has been a burst of scholarly attention to women and crime, very few studies have been based on data obtained first hand from the women themselves in order to explore their own perceptions, experiences, and motivations for engaging in illegal activity. Nor have any studies focused specifically on women's criminal "careers," how women enter into illegal activities and what kind of progression occurs over time. Studies by Romenesko and Miller (1989), Miller's (1986) book titled *Street Woman*, and a study of women incarcerated in Hawaii conducted by Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez (1983) offer the most detailed, interview-based data available to date on the lives of women who engage in street crime.

Miller (1986) concludes that economic marginality is strongly connected to women's motivations to enter illegal activity, and that black and white women enter illegal "street work" through somewhat different routes. She found family violence and runaway status more related to white women's entry patterns, while black women were more likely to be introduced to illegal activity through kin and neighborhood networks.

Miller (1986) and Romenesko and Miller (1989) document that once women become involved in illegal street work, they become part of a highly gendered division of labor in the male-dominated world of street hustling. The male heads of the "pseudo-families"

which are organized around street hustling activities keep women in subordinate positions by fostering competition among "their women," keeping the women economically dependent, and by physical and psychological abuse (Romenesko and Miller, 1989).

Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez's (1983) in-depth interviews with women incarcerated in Hawaii also reveal life histories which are characterized by high rates of victimization. Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez (1983;62-63) conclude that victimization results in a "process of criminalization unique to women" in which

> young girls faced with violence and/or sexual abuse at home . . . became criminalized by their efforts to save themselves (by running away) from the abuse. . . . Once on the streets, the position afforded these women in the criminal world indicates that, again, it was not liberation but lack of formal education and genuine employment options that forced them to continue committing crimes.

Chesney-Lind (1989) argues that the "criminalization of girls' survival strategies" is the process by which young women who are victims of violence become transformed into offenders. This study illustrates that process of criminalization of girls' survival strategies and shows when and how a small sample of women entered into illegal activities. The study also explores how women's relational identities and socialization into nurturing and caretaking roles shape the ways in which women approach criminal activities.

THE STUDY DATA AND METHODS

This study is a qualitative analysis of 20 life history interviews with incarcerated women who range in age from 20 to 41 years old, eight of whom are black women and thirteen of whom are white. The study was conducted in 1985-6 at a women's prison in a northeastern state. It should be noted that the state in which the study was conducted had no local or county jail facilities for women, and therefore all women sentenced to any type of jail or prison term were housed in the state prison. This sample, then, reflects a

sentenced population of women which combines a typical jail population (usually misdemeanants serving sentences under one year) with a typical prison population (usually felony offenders sentenced to more than one year).

Volunteer subjects were recruited from the inmate population at orientation meetings for newly sentenced inmates and from drug education groups. Twenty-one tape recorded life history interviews were conducted. One respondent, a 38 year old white woman who was incarcerated for her third offense of driving while intoxicated, was dropped from the sample because she had no history of involvement in the types of illegal activities defined here as street crimes (prostitution, shoplifting, drug offenses, check fraud, etc.) (see Miller, 1986). This method of availability sampling results in a sample which was not randomly selected from the prison population. Conclusions drawn from the study are preliminary, and further research is recommended to test whether the hypotheses offered here are applicable to a wider sample of women offenders.

Each interview took from three to five hours to complete. An interview guide was used to provide a loose structure for each interview. Every woman was encouraged to tell her own life story in her own words as much as possible within a chronological and developmental framework. The interviewer asked structured questions from the interview guide at appropriate times in the interviews in order to assure that all interviews covered the same topical areas: family composition, childhood development, family patterns of substance abuse, educational and employment history, physical and sexual violence, relationship histories, and substance abuse and criminal histories. The semi-structured nature of the life history interview allowed each respondent to select and elaborate upon the central themes and significant events in her life as she defined them.

Qualitative Analysis

Three qualitative techniques of data analysis were employed: reconstruction of chronological life event histories, narrative coding of interview segments by themes, and thematic coding across interviews.

Each interview was coded into chronological life event histories

in order to examine the nature and timing of events presented as significant by each woman interviewed. Histories of family violence, clustering of events around early adolescence, and events surrounding entry into illegal activity emerged as central themes across interviews.

Using the concept of narrative analysis (Mishler, 1986), interviews were broken down into narrative segments, discreet sections of the interviews in which interviewees were telling a story with an organizing theme. Those narrative segments were then organized according to childhood, adolescent, and adulthood themes. Then themes were coded and compared across interviews, using standard qualitative coding techniques to group cases conceptually, generating hypotheses, and searching for cases to disprove or challenge each emerging hypothesis (Emerson, 1983; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Results are presented according to childhood events and themes which clustered around family violence and learning caretaking roles, adolescent turning points which include entry into illegal activity and themes of survival, and adult themes of organizing illegal work around relational and caretaking commitments.

Description of the Interview Sample

The interview group of 20 women ranged in age from 20 to 41 years old with a mean age of 30 and included eight black women and 12 white women. Eight women were experiencing their first incarceration, four women were incarcerated for the second time, and eight women had been incarcerated from three to eight times. All of the interviewees, including those experiencing a first incarceration, had arrest records prior to the arrests which resulted in the current incarceration. All of the women had offense histories which fall within the definition of "street crimes": prostitution, shoplifting, check or credit card fraud, and drug law violations (see Miller, 1986). Four women were incarcerated for assault and battery charges (one woman had an additional charge of accessory to rape). Two women were incarcerated for breaking and entering offenses. The remaining fourteen women were sentenced on multiple charges of drug possession, prostitution, and larceny. Sentence

lengths ranged from three months to 20 years, with half of the women serving sentences of less than one year.

The majority of the women interviewed were never married and were single mothers. Only three women were legally married at the time of the interview, while three others had been married and were divorced or separated. Fifteen of the women had living children who had not been put up for adoption. Sixteen of the 20 women had dropped out of high school; half of them had since obtained a high school equivalency diploma, while eight women still had less than a twelfth grade education.

Fifteen of the women reported themselves to be addicted intravenous drug abusers, and three women were self-reported alcoholics with some poly-drug abuse. Seventeen women discussed prostitution histories, and seven of those began as juvenile prostitutes.

The black women interviewed had somewhat longer criminal records than the white women when measured by number of prior incarcerations, but were incarcerated for very similar offenses. No differences by race were noted in marital status, drug histories, or histories of involvement in prostitution.

The above demographic characteristics of the interview sample are generally representative of the inmate population of the institution in which the study was conducted and similarly reflective of the characteristics of incarcerated women nationally (American Correctional Association, 1990; Glick and Neto, 1977; GAO, 1979; Lewis, 1981; Sarri, 1987). The major disparity between this sample and the national portrait of incarcerated women is that 40% of this sample are minority group women (all of those are black women). Nationally one-half of all incarcerated women are women from racial and ethnic minority groups, with regional variations in proportions from African-American, Latina, Native American, or other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

CHILDHOOD: THEMES OF VIOLENCE AND CARING FOR OTHERS

Thematic coding of the childhood segments of the interviews were organized around the predominating themes by which each

woman described her childhood memories. For most of the women the dominant themes were of violence, loss, and neglect with a strong sub-theme in which they portrayed themselves as caring for and protecting other family members.

Family Backgrounds

Four of the 20 women interviewed reported that they grew up in middle class families, 12 in working class families, and four in poor families which periodically received welfare benefits. The black women in the study were generally from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds than the white women.

Five women (two black and three white) reported growing up in families in which both parents were present throughout childhood, but four of those five families were characterized by parental substance abuse and family violence. The remaining 15 women were from families disrupted during childhood by divorce, death, or desertion. Four women lost a parent during childhood due to death, two of those by suicide. Four of the eight black women had been cared for during some or all of their childhoods by grandparents or other members of their extended families, and two of the white women had spent some time in foster homes.

Eleven of the women felt that one or both parents (or guardians) had significant problems with drugs or alcohol, and ten women had seen their mothers battered by male family members. These patterns of family substance abuse and violence were similar for both the black and the white women.

Thirteen of the 20 women reported experiences of childhood sexual abuse. They reported an average of two different perpetrators each, with ten women reporting sexual abuse (incest) by a male family member. Fifteen of the women reported recurrent episodes of physical abuse by family members which resulted in bodily injuries and could be classified as severe child abuse. There were no differences between the black women and the white women either in the proportion who reported childhood physical and sexual abuse, or in the types of abuse reported.

Sexual Abuse and Incest

Five women's childhood memories were organized almost completely around sexual abuse experiences. These women explained their involvement in illegal activities as a direct result of childhood sexual abuse. For example, Janet, a 28 year old black woman incarcerated for breaking and entering, was sexually victimized repeatedly during childhood. Her first memory of sexual abuse was by a female babysitter around the age of three or four, then by a group of male and female cousins from age five to seven, then by her grandfather at the age of ten, by another male cousin at age twelve, and finally by her step-father from the age of twelve to fourteen. She never told anyone of these experiences. Janet left home at age 14 to escape her stepfather's sexual abuse and became involved in prostitution as a teenage runaway. The resulting drug addiction and abusive domination by her male partner kept Janet immersed in a variety of street crime activities.

Sarah, a 26 year old white woman, was incarcerated for writing illegal prescriptions for drugs. She was sexually abused by her step-father from the age of nine to fifteen. Her step-father gave her drugs, money, and other gifts in order to secure her silence and cooperation in his sexual abuse. She became addicted to drugs while still living at home and being sexually abused by her step-father. All of her criminal activity involved forging prescriptions in order to obtain drugs to maintain her habit.

Multiple Types of Abuse and Neglect

Ten other women organized their childhood memories around multiple forms of abuse and neglect. Marcia, a twenty-eight year old white woman, was one of ten children. Her parents were both alcoholics. Her father battered her mother, both parents battered the children and neglected their basic needs, and the two oldest sons sexually abused Marcia. She graphically portrayed herself as a "guinea pig," a "gopher," and "not human" in the following interview excerpts. At the same time, she minimized the extent of her parents' violence.

Interviewer: Did either of your parents abuse you?

Marcia: No. As far as, what do you mean, sexually? No.

Interviewer: Physically or in any way.

Marcia: No, I just got hit a lot. 'Cause of the lies they used to tell. It was just like I was a guinea pig. You know, I was a gopher, out of ten kids, anything that used to happen, they said "she did it." I used to get beat up all the time from this one and that one.

Interviewer: So your parents both would hit you?

Marcia: 'Cause they both would drink and they wouldn't know the difference. Mmm, picked up, thrown against walls, everything. You name it.

Interviewer: Did you ever have to go to a doctor or hospital for any injuries?

Marcia: No, never went, I always hid it. Bruises and welts all over me. Teachers used to ask me what's wrong with ya? I'd say I fell down.

Marcia, perhaps not unlike other abused children, protected her parents from discovery by covering up the signs of her abuse. Next she described the neglect which accompanied the abuse. In doing so, she focused on the embarrassment she felt about going to school in dirty, ragged, and inappropriate clothing and described a number of strategies she used for coping with the neglect and the embarrassment: hiding, skipping school, daydreaming and fantasizing, and finally giving up.

Interviewer: Do you remember what it was like when you started school? How did it feel to you?

Marcia: Weird. 'Cause I wasn't dressed right or nothin', I didn't feel comfortable, I felt like a black sheep. Didn't have proper care. You know.

My mother would say "Go to school like you are, get your own clothes." You know odd socks, the whole bit. Oh god, I used to dread that.

So I never went, I hated it. Used to hide. Hated bein' laughed at. Teased. . . . Felt like I wasn't a human, like I was a creature or somethin', all dirty and you know. . . . I don't know . . . just didn't like it. And I used to get hit for that too, and I didn't care. My father would hit me and say: "Why wasn't you in school today?" But he wouldn't find out until about six months later. 'Cause they never went to any events or anything like that.

I couldn't do home work, I couldn't concentrate, I couldn't do none of it. It was never quiet enough. And I had to sleep in a room with me and four brothers. . . .

I failed quite a few grades 'cause I used to day dream, and I didn't do the work. I didn't give a shit. I was in a fantasy land. I said: "I'm just going to be a movie star when I grow up, I don't need this homework shit." I didn't care. I didn't have nothin' to care about.

Caring for Others

In spite of the violence and neglect the women recalled in childhood, they often framed their presentations of themselves as protectors and caretakers of others. The following narrative by Denise, a 31 year old black woman recalling events when she was ten years old, illustrates this point.

When my mother was going with this guy she really started drinking a lot and she started staying away from home a lot. So we had to get ourselves up for school, get ready, clean the house, fix ourselves something to eat. Me, my older sister and my brother, we looked out for the little ones. And we learned to cook, and we knew how to wash clothes with a rub board and a bucket. We used to get this stool and stand on it

to reach the stove and cook. But we knew how to cook, we could cook anything.

And we didn't like to see her like that. She would be sick, and she would piss on herself and throw up on herself. And we used to clean her up, fix her hair, and try to get her to eat something. But she couldn't keep anything down, so we would get her some liquor, because we thought that would help her. Or if we refused to go get her some liquor, she would hit us. We would get mad at her and threaten to tell our father, but she threatened to flush our heads down the toilet, and we really believed that, so we never told, and we just did what we had to do.

In this narrative Denise recalled very actively trying to cope with her mother's alcoholism. She and her siblings took over all of the household tasks and began acting as parents toward their mother. They tried to intervene to stop their mother's drinking, but were eventually defeated by her threats and abusive behavior. Denise took pride in her ability to nurture the younger children and, in spite of her anger at her mother, remained loyal to her and very lovingly cared for her. This sense of self as a caretaker of others was a positive part of Denise's identity, as it was for many of the other women interviewed. Yet this ability to care for others who are abusive and neglectful caused Denise much trouble throughout her life. The first man she fell in love with was a pimp and an addict who beat her and lived off of her earnings as a prostitute, yet her loyalty to him allowed her to serve an earlier prison sentence for a crime which she now claims he had committed.

Educational Neglect and Racial Violence

Another set of themes in the childhood memories of many of the women, but particularly the black women and the white women who grew up in poor inner-city neighborhoods, were themes of educational neglect and racism. Many of the women attended public schools during the turbulent years of school desegregation.

Three of the black women directly experienced racial violence as children. Denise had seen her uncle murdered by two white

men, Karen had been constantly taunted by white students in her school, and Tina had been insulted and slapped in school by white teachers. The remaining five black women attended predominantly black schools where they were not so directly exposed to white racism, but they were aware that they were receiving a segregated and inadequate education. Some of their parents spent scarce family resources sending the children to private Catholic schools, but the young women again encountered hostility and insults from students and teachers with low expectations and condescending attitudes toward black children. Many of the women recalled that they had once dreamed of going to college and entering professional careers, but had found no support for those aspirations.

Other complaints about school which were echoed by most of the women included teachers who failed to notice the signs of their abuse and the easy availability of drugs in the schools. Feeling like failures and misfits, unable to concentrate on school work, and their pain unacknowledged, the availability of drugs was too easy a temptation to turn down. Many of the young women found their first feeling of acceptance and belonging in the drug subculture of their schools.

ADOLESCENCE: SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AND DELINQUENCY

With the onset of adolescence themes of violence and caring for others, as well as the dreams for a successful future, gave way to questions of survival and escape.

Survival Strategies

Escape from an intolerable home situation may sometimes be the only sane solution for an abused child, and the only way to end the violence. But when children or adolescents run away and seek sanctuary wherever they can find it, usually with "street people" and other runaways, they become delinquents in the eyes of law enforcement rather than children in need of protection from the recruiters for the sex and drug industries who prey on runaway