

Discuss the role of age and gender as influences on criminal behaviour

Delinquency rates for both males and females consistently increase from about age eight, peaking at 16 to 17, then rapidly decline in the late teens and early 20s. It is generally agreed that the rise in offending rates with age reflects increasing prevalence (Hollin, 1999) rather than a rise in incidence. 'Crime rate' refers to prevalence, in terms of the percentage of people of specific ages who commit offences. About 20 per cent of 12-year-olds, 80 per cent of 16-year-olds, 20 per cent of 36-year-olds, and 8 per cent of 52-year-olds commit crime.

Although juveniles commit a lot of crime, most is relatively trivial, including a large number of status offences that apply only to young people, such as truancy and under-age drinking. Although young people do also commit index offences (serious offences, such as murder and robbery), status offences are much more common (Hollin, 1999).

The age-crime relationship also shows that most crime is 'adolescence-limited' (Moffitt, 1993); that is, most young people 'grow out' of delinquency by the time they are eighteen. According to Hendry (1999), risk-taking has been one of the attributes of youth since adolescence became recognised as a distinct period of the lifespan. Risk-taking and delinquency are undoubtedly interrelated.

Lyon (1998) observes that 84 per cent of recorded crime is committed by men, who comprise 96 per cent of the prison population in England and Wales. Until recently, the 'maleness' of crime was taken as an accepted fact. In contrast to the 'ordinariness' of male crime, the few early studies of female offenders focused on their extraordinariness, as odd or ill creatures deviating from the norm (Lyon, 1998). In the 1970s, feminist perspectives began to develop in criminology, and the neglect of gender was highlighted.

It has been suggested that the criminal justice system is more lenient towards females, so that the gender difference in violent crime is not in fact as large as official figures would make it seem (Harrower, 1998). But at the same time, there have been numerous cases in Britain of men killing their wives for trivial reasons, being found guilty of manslaughter and walking free after five or six years in prison, while women who kill their husbands tend to be convicted of murder and receive a life sentence (Smith, 1998). This injustice has led to the overturning of verdicts in celebrated cases like that of Sara Thornton, who was initially convicted of her husband's murder. She successfully argued that the court should have taken into account the cumulative effect of her husband's violence towards her, and she was released from jail.

According to Lyon (1998), there is considerable evidence that men and women are treated differently by the criminal justice system. Ideas and attitudes about what constitutes 'normal' male and female behaviour affect how female offenders are treated. Hedderman & Gelsthorpe (1997) examined 13,000 cases of men and women convicted of shoplifting, violence and drug offences during 1991. For virtually every type of offence, they found that women were treated more leniently than men. In interviews with 200 magistrates they found that they were reluctant to fine women, especially those with dependent children, were more likely to define women offenders as troubled rather than troublesome, and to see their crimes as motivated by need rather than greed.

A high proportion of female offenders have themselves been the victims of crime. Belknap (1996) found that prior victimisation, running away, drug offences, prostitution and subsequent imprisonment were interrelated. Morris *et al.* (1994) surveyed large numbers of female prisoners in England and Wales and found that almost half reported

either being physically abused as children or being the victims of domestic violence as adults. Another third reported sexual abuse.

The most common female crimes are theft and property-related crimes, with a rising incidence of drug-related offences and crimes of violence against the person. Women are more likely to be in prison for the first time; about 70 per cent are 'first timers' and are less likely to re-offend on release than males. Under 50 per cent of female young offenders re-offend within two years, compared with 80 per cent of male young offenders.

Feminist psychologists have helped to promote the view that 'masculinity' itself should be examined more closely in order to understand why so many young men commit offences and are the victims of crime. Because of men's domination of all aspects of crime and the criminal justice system, it is only recently that their gender and the construction of their masculinity have been considered valid areas for study in their own right.

According to Lyon (1998), two major explanations of the male domination of crime are biological determinism and social constructionism. Are men born to take risks, challenge authority, become violent and commit crimes? Or do they learn these behaviours and is crime the context in which their masculine identity develops and is affirmed? Because the vast majority of offenders are male, and this pattern is repeated internationally, Harrower's (1998) suggestion that it is the cultural history and social construction of masculinity that ensures so many young males become involved in crime needs to be explored. Lyon (1998) suggests a new research focus on masculinity and crime that seeks to challenge popular images of young men as yobs and thugs, and to question their 'natural' involvement in offending.