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From Victims to Survivors to Offenders

Women's Routes of Entry and Immersion Into Street Crime

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This study explores the patterns by which women enter into crime by drawing on 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 that are criminal (i.e., running away from home, drug use, 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 that explain their entry into and commitments to criminal activities. Women's responses to victimization and women's relational identities are seen as factors that both motivate and restrain women's criminal activities. The term "immersion in street crime" is more accurate 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, 1988). Yet this literature, thus far, centers almost exclusively about *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 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 men's interpretation of 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. 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. When women do commit acts of violence, it is most likely against family members and in a context of self defense. 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. 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. 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.

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 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.

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 stepfather. 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 28-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 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 something 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 insult 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 children. This was exactly what happened during adolescence for many of the women interviewed.

Yvonne, a 20-year-old white woman incarcerated for drug possession, began running away from home at age 13 because she was being sexually molested by an uncle, occasionally physically abused by her mother, and emotionally taxed by her mother's episodes of depression and suicide attempts. On one of her first escapes from home she packed a suitcase full of stuffed animals and tried to hitchhike to where she thought a boyfriend lived, only to be picked up by the police and returned home. She continued to run away and was placed in several foster homes. She was raped by a foster

brother in one of those homes, and while she was in foster care her mother gave away her dog. Feeling that she had nothing left to care about at home, she went to New York City with a boyfriend. She described the plight of a runaway with no money.

The third night came, we had no more money. He said "get some money." I didn't understand what he was talking about. But he was talking about being a prostitute. . . . We didn't have a place to stay, we slept on trains. . . . I had to steal food. Times I went two, three days without eating, I'd have to steal something.

Yvonne began working as a prostitute and shoplifting to insure that she and her boyfriend had food and a place to stay.

Janet, who had been sexually abused multiple times as a child, engaged in a long narrative detailing the events leading up to the day she left home and the experiences which followed. At age 14 Janet felt pressured to have intercourse with her boyfriend in order to prove that she loved him. After their first sexual experience, her boyfriend left for summer camp. She described in great detail the day he returned from summer camp, and how she baked a cake for him and waited all day for him. He finally arrived at her house and announced that he was breaking up with her because she had not been a virgin for him. She was mortified that he had been able to tell that she was sexually "experienced" as a result of having forced intercourse with her stepfather.

After the rejection by her boyfriend she went to her father's nearby home and waited for him to return home from work. Just as he pulled into the driveway, teenage boys in a passing car yelled and waved at Janet, and she responded by waving back at them. Her father got out of his car, slapped her on the face and called her a "whore." Taking this as another rejection, Janet went home and tried to commit suicide by taking a bottle of aspirin. She slept for several hours and awoke to discover that no one had even noticed her suicide gesture, so she ran away. (Suicide was seriously considered as an escape by many of the women, and ten women made suicide attempts during adolescence).

Janet ran away to a nearby city where she was kidnapped, raped, and injected with drugs by a man who told her he was planning to sell her as a slave to a pimp. She escaped from her kidnapper and eventually returned home, but was once again faced with her stepfather's sexual demands and her mother's lack of concern. She ran away again and lied about her age in order to get a waitress job, only to be sexually

harassed by her employer. This was the final straw for Janet; she decided that if everyone expected her to be a "whore" she might as well make some money at it. She went out on a street corner in the downtown prostitution district and tried soliciting customers on her own. Within minutes she was befriended by a man who offered to be her pimp, and she readily accepted. Janet had begun experimenting with drugs at age 12, began intravenous use of heroin shortly after entering prostitution, and reported that she was addicted by the age of 16 when she became pregnant with her first child.

Janet presented the above events as a way of explaining her entry into illegal street work, the best survival strategy she could find as a 14-year-old incest victim and runaway.

Onset of Delinquency

Chronologically the first "delinquent" event experienced by 13 of the 20 women was running away from home. When we consider the fact that most of the young women were being abused at home, running away seems to have been a sane and logical response. That logical act of self-protection, however, pushed the young women into finding illegal ways of supporting themselves.

Onset of drug use, truancy and stealing were closely associated with early runaway attempts. The women talked about how impossible it was to stay in school when on the run, sleeping in cars, parks, or "crash pads," and "hustling" money for food by panhandling and petty shoplifting. The first use of drugs or alcohol was reported at a mean age of 12.7 years old. The average age at leaving home for the whole sample was 16 years old, a very young age to be fending for oneself. Seven of the 17 women who had worked as prostitutes began as juvenile prostitutes, four of them having been coerced into prostitution while young runaways.

The Transition to Adulthood

Leaving home at an early age, often coupled with teenage pregnancy meant that adulthood began early for these women. Patterns of repeated victimization, drug addiction, street work, relationships with men involved in street crime, and the demands of mothering are the themes that mark their transitions from childhood to adulthood. The survival strategies which had helped the women escape from early victimization contributed to revictimization and their adult status as offenders. Yet, much like their childhood identities, the women presented themselves as adults committed to caring for others and organizing their lives around

relational commitments. It was usually their relational commitments and their addiction to drugs which they described as creating the conditions which necessitated their continued involvement in criminal activity.

Street Work and Revictimization

Survival on the streets of any city is dangerous for a young woman. If she is too young to look for legal work or has too few skills to find work at a living wage, she has few choices other than to find a "hustle" which will generate income for food and a place to sleep. Whether looking for shelter, panhandling, shoplifting, selling drugs, or turning tricks, a young woman alone on the streets is often "fair game" for male violence (see Weisberg, 1985; Delacoste and Alexander, 1987). Rape, assault, and even attempted murder were experiences reported by 16 of the 20 women, with an average of three rapes or violent rape attempts per woman as adolescents or adults. Many of the rapes and assaults occurred while the women were working as prostitutes. A common scenario was for a trick to pick up the woman in his car, drive her to a remote location, rape and torture her, and leave her perhaps to die. The women who reported these crimes to the police were ridiculed and/or threatened with arrest for prostitution. Sometimes police officers would demand sexual services in exchange for not arresting the woman.

Battering Relationships

Sixteen of the women had been in battering relationships as adults, some as many as five different battering relationships. These were typically co-addict relationships in which the couple shared the activities of securing and injecting drugs, but had a gendered division of labor for illegally obtaining money for drugs. The female partner was often expected to supply money from her work as a prostitute and from shoplifting. Male partners, if they did any work other than pimping, were likely to commit robberies or did the fencing of the goods the women shoplifted. Severe battering episodes were likely to occur if the male partner felt the woman was using more than her "share" of the money on drugs, or if she was not producing "enough" income, or if he felt like punishing her for working as a prostitute.

Marcia, whose childhood narrative of abuse and neglect was presented above ran away at age 13 to the streets of a nearby city. There she met Charlie, a pimp for whom she worked from the age of 13 to 18, whenever she was not in juvenile detention halls. Charlie employed the techniques pimps often use to "season" young women into

dependent and loyal prostitutes (Barry, 1984): isolation, physical violence, occasional indulgences of presents (usually drugs), and romantic vows of love. Marcia described being kept in darkened hotel rooms, heavily drugged, turning tricks, and being beaten periodically. At the time she was interviewed, Marcia had served a sentence for a crime which took place while Charlie was recruiting a new runaway to work for him, yet she still felt a strong bond of loyalty and affection for Charlie.

Addiction

Substance abuse has repeatedly been found to be one of the major long-term psychological effects of childhood sexual abuse (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Peters, 1988; Russell, Sherman, & Trocki, 1988; Stein et al., 1988). Nearly all of the 15 women who reported intravenous drug abuse histories began experimental drug or alcohol use prior to engaging in illegal activity (other than running away from home), on average by age 13. Accounts of why they started using drugs were strikingly similar, using terms such as "wanting to be obliterated" and describing their initial work as prostitutes as so "disgusting" that they "had to be high to do it." Additional reasons for beginning drug use included acceptance by peer groups and feelings of greater self-confidence when high. But the primary pattern of shifting from experimental use to intravenous use of opiates and/or cocaine typically occurred after entry into illegal activity, primarily prostitution. Many of the women attributed their continuing motivation for illegal activities to their deepening addiction to drugs. They also described numerous efforts to give up drugs, efforts which were often motivated by pregnancy or by the fear of losing custody of their children.

Mothering

Thirteen women became pregnant as teenagers; only four of them kept their first baby, struggling to survive as single teen parents. The nine women who miscarried, aborted, or gave their babies up for adoption deeply mourned the loss and felt that the loss had pushed them further into drug abuse and illegal activity. It was not long before some of the women became pregnant again and tried to keep their children in spite of their worsening addiction. Fifteen of the women had custody of their children prior to incarceration. All of the women whose mothers were still alive were in regular, nearly daily, contact with their mothers prior to incarceration, and most of the women had placed their children with their mothers while

incarcerated. Even the mothers who had been physically and emotionally abusive toward them were entrusted with the care of their children. This arrangement was preferable to giving custody over to the state and risking permanent loss of one's children. One of the recurring themes expressed by the women was the pain and guilt they felt about their children. Most of the women saw themselves as good and loving mothers who tried very hard to protect their children from the negative effects of their own illegal activities, but who were increasingly torn between the competing demands of addiction, mothering, and hustling.

Relational Patterns of Entry and Immersion in Illegal Activities

Most of the women attributed some relational components to their reasons for entry into delinquent and illegal activity, either in response to childhood family violence, or death of a parent, or in response to adult marital or family issues. It should be noted that the women presented these connections not as excuses for their crimes, in fact, most of the women were quick to take responsibility for their actions, but rather as a constellation of problems which led them to "the street life."

Fourteen women had established patterns of serial relationships with men who shared and encouraged their drug abuse and illegal work and who used violence to keep the women "in line." Those 14 women presented themselves primarily in terms of their relational identities, organizing their legal work around caretaking responsibilities, and often *defining* their illegal work as a part of their caretaking roles. Thus these women had spent most of their adult years involved in a series of relationships in which mutual drug abuse and illegal activity were an integral part of the relationship. Interestingly, while the women defined their caretaking roles to include economic support of their partners, they did not define or expect their partners' roles to include childcare responsibilities. Seven women were currently incarcerated for offenses which they reported were committed with or by the male partner. All but one of the women who typically worked and lived in partnerships with men had been battered in those relationships.

Five women remained relatively independent of male partners after leaving their families of origin. One woman entered a long-term lesbian relationship, but was evasive about whether as a couple they shared a pattern of addiction and illegal activity. These five women seemed more independently committed to illegal activity and continued such activity

whether or not they were in relationships with partners who supported or disapproved of their activity. Their illegal activity was still well within the traditional realm of women's street crimes: prostitution, petty drug trafficking, and shoplifting. What appeared to distinguish these women from the more traditional women was their obvious pride in their abilities at performing illegal work and the benefits which attracted them to it (fast money and the excitement and glamour of a "party" lifestyle). It is possible that these women were in fairly early stages of illegal street work, a time when the benefits appear to outweigh the risks and the costs (Rosenbaum, 1981; Romenesko and Miller, 1989). Three of these five women expressed a desire (without much optimism of successfully fulfilling it) to eventually marry, have children and leave behind their illegal work. Thus even the most independent of the women in this study were traditional in their views on women's roles and in the types of illegal activities in which they participated.

Caretaking Roles

A central theme in the ways the women presented themselves was as caretakers. Sometimes caretaking was a reason for initial entry into illegal work, other times illegal work was perceived as an integral component of a caretaking role.

Lois, a 37-year-old white woman, is an example of a woman who clearly defined her illegal work as one aspect of traditional female responsibilities. Lois was violently abused as a child and sexually assaulted by her father at age 14. By age 17 she fell in love with a male addict and left home. She began using heroin just to be with him and continued using it, even though she disliked it, until she was also addicted. She had initially supplied the couple's drug money by stealing from her family, but when she could no longer get away with that, she took responsibility for finding a way to support their shared addiction. She described feeling especially nurturing toward her partner when he was experiencing withdrawal symptoms. She thought about her money-earning capabilities and options, realizing that she could not earn enough money through legal employment. She thought about robbery, but ruled this out on ethical grounds fearing that she might hurt someone. She then decided on prostitution thinking that "this way I was only hurting myself." At the age of 37 Lois was in her fifth addicted and battering relationship, again supplying money for her partner's drugs from her illegal work. By now she had abandoned her ethical stance and had resorted to breaking

and entering because of her dwindling earning power as a prostitute. This caused her to begin examining the reasons for her vulnerability to abusive partners, and she had just begun to regain memories of being sexually assaulted by her father.

Ann, a 37-year-old black woman, was serving six months for disorderly conduct (a prostitution-related offense). Ann was violently abused by her stepfather from the ages of ten to 16. Whenever she had to be taken to the hospital for treatment of her injuries, her mother would lie about the source of the injuries, and Ann would collaborate in the lies, explaining: "I loved my mother, and I knew they would take me away from her if I told the truth." At age 16 she moved into her own apartment and worked for a year in a low-paying clerical job. That year she was raped by the first boyfriend she had ever dated. Feeling alone and betrayed, struggling economically, Ann was convinced by a girlfriend to go "downtown" to get a job as a go-go dancer. Ann enjoyed the money she began making and was enthralled by the glitter of "downtown" life. She soon met and fell in love with Joe, a flashy pimp who made no effort to conceal his plans for Ann. She readily agreed to work as a prostitute for him, explaining in retrospect: "I was a fool for love."

Joe already had a wife and children. Ann moved in with Joe, Carol, and the children. Both women took turns working as prostitutes for Joe and caring for the children. Joe battered both women regularly, but Ann felt that she was his "number one" woman since he beat Carol more severely. Ann described herself as the mother of the family, looking after Carol when she was injured or drug sick, making sure the children were properly clothed and fed, and serving as Joe's helpmate in his illegal operations. Ann bragged about obtaining a gun so she could return home periodically to threaten her stepfather that she would kill him if he ever hurt her mother or her younger sister. After 14 years in this family style arrangement, Joe replaced Ann with another "number one" woman, and Ann left. Ann had spent the last five years in what she described as an often-faltering effort to remain drug and arrest-free, going back to school, and living with a series of partners, but vowing not to fall in love again the way she had with Joe. Ann's narrative about her years with Joe focused heavily on the sense of fulfillment she derived from her caretaking roles which were rather androgynous: protector to her mother and sister, breadwinner and protector to Carol, and sometimes co-equal partner in crime with Joe, yet also stereotypically

feminine in her nurturing, loyalty, and acceptance of Joe's domination in the family.

Some of the women interviewed began their illegal activities independently, usually as a means of obtaining drugs, but later organized their illegal work around their caretaking roles. Ellen, a 32-year-old white woman and mother of four young children, was serving a ten year sentence for distribution of narcotics. Ellen's father died when she was five years old; as an only child she grew up with a close bond with her mother who was severely depressed and abused prescription drugs. When Ellen was 18 years old her mother committed suicide, and Ellen began using heroin to deal with her own depression. She worked as a street prostitute and occasionally shoplifted to support her addiction. She eventually met Bill, a heroin addict, and they had four children together. Ellen tried from time to time to give up her heroin habit, but each time she was drug-free she became depressed and suicidal.

Ellen's identity revolved around her children, but unable to control her addiction, she organized her illegal work to accommodate her caretaking responsibilities. She did this by turning her home into a "shooting gallery," a place where other addicts could come to purchase and inject heroin. She described in careful detail the ways she managed her "business," operating only while the children were asleep or at school, so that her children would be sheltered from any knowledge of her activities. Of course this careful arrangement fell apart when she and Bill were arrested; the state took custody of their children and was petitioning for permanent adoptive homes for them. Ellen, having been unable to juggle the competing demands of her addiction and her mothering responsibilities, was seriously considering suicide if the state succeeded in removing her parental rights.

Conclusions and Implications

The life histories examined here suggest that the nature of the violence to which some women have been exposed serves as a strong force in the "criminalization" of women, that is, the survival strategies selected by (or which are the only options available to) some women are the beginning of a process of transition from victim to offender.

The women in this study were victims of an overwhelming amount of violence as children and adults, yet they were on the whole committed to not harming others in their criminal activities. In spite of, or perhaps because of, those early experiences of violence, the women

adopted roles and identities as caretakers and protectors, often remaining loyal to parents (and later to partners) who abused and exploited them. During adolescence the young women responded to those violations by striking out on their own, running away literally as well as symbolically through the use of drugs, but in doing so, their chances of achieving normative transitions to adult roles and responsibilities were derailed. What may have appeared to be the best available means of escape from violence meant that as young runaways they had to begin illegal “work” simply in order to survive, thus linking victimization to “criminalization” and blurring the boundaries between victim and offender. Those early experiences of violence may have had a strong socializing impact on the women’s development of highly gender stereotyped identities centered around distorted notions of relational and caretaking obligations. Constant and repeated victimization by violence from early childhood into adulthood apparently seasons women well for the world of illegal street work where women’s work is still highly exploited.

It is apparent that the women in this study consider their illegal activities to be a form of *work* which is undertaken primarily out of economic necessity to support partners, children, and addictions. Yet it is not so clear that terms such as “criminal careers” or “career criminals” are accurate descriptions of the women’s activities or identities. At this stage of our thinking about women and crime, a more accurate conceptualization may be that of “immersion,” a concept which takes into account the slide into criminality by way of survival strategies and which reflects the difficulty women have in extricating themselves from the relationships, addictions, and economic necessities which arise once they are immersed in “street work.” However, further research is needed to test and elaborate upon the preliminary conceptualizations offered here.

The women studied here, similar to those studied by Romenesko and Miller (1989), Miller (1986), and Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez (1983), entered criminal activity which was itself highly sex-role stereotyped, suggesting that the division of labor remains highly sex-segregated whether in the world of legal or illegal work, and that such sex-segregation is enforced through physical and sexual violence. These findings also support the conclusions drawn by Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez (1983) that the process of criminalization for women is indeed intricately connected to women’s subordinate position in society where victimization by violence coupled with economic

marginality related to race, class, and gender all too often blur the boundaries between victims and offenders.

When women have been violated and exploited as harshly and as often as the women in this study, one must ask how those experiences of violence affect women’s development and women’s moral orientation to the world. When extreme victimization is accompanied by poverty and racial discrimination, women may have very few options for survival by legal avenues and may find a sense of belonging and relational commitment in the world of street crime when it is unattainable elsewhere.

Exposure to such extreme violence may socialize women to adopt a tenacious commitment to caring for anyone who promises love, material success, and acceptance, such that it represents an extreme liability for self survival and places some women at risk for becoming offenders. While women’s moral orientation to caring (Gilligan, 1982), in the abstract, may appear to be an asset, in a social context of violence and an absence of the right to protection, the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982) can be fatal. For the women in this study, the ethic of care appears to constrain them from initially engaging in more violent and serious crime, yet it is also that ethic coupled with the strength of women’s commitment to relationships which seasons the women for recruitment and entrapment in illegal street work and ultimately leads to incarceration. Perhaps at later stages of their involvement in street work, the ethic of care gives way once again to questions of sheer survival, pushing some women into more serious forms of illegal activity. Future research should examine those later stages of women’s immersion in street crime.

As we continue to investigate and understand the lives of women engaged in street crime, we can begin to call for criminal justice policies and programs which recognize the relationship between victimization and offending among women. We must begin to offer women realistic alternatives to illegal street work as a means of economic and emotional survival.

Discussion Questions

1. Is criminal behavior higher among abused/neglected girls and women than among girls who have not been abused? Discuss why this may or may not be the case.
2. Why does running away play such a major part in girls’ delinquency but a minor part in boys’ delinquency?

3. How do men keep women street hustlers dependent on them for survival?
4. Out of all the pathways and experiences of women in Gilfus' study, which factor is most strongly correlated to the *victimization* of women?
5. Which factor is most responsible for the *criminalization* of women and why? How do these criminalization experiences overlap with victimization?

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