

Women, Illicit Drugs, and Crime

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1. INTRODUCTION

Illicit drug use is, by definition, a crime. That simple observation thrusts illicit drug use into the realm of law-breaking behaviors long dominated by men. Thus, the question of women's patterns of illicit drug use and their relation to criminal activities must be addressed within the broader context of gender differences in criminal and delinquent behavior. The literature reviewed in this chapter is unequivocal on two points; that research on women has been neglected in the fields of both criminology and addictions (Miller, 1983; Prather and Fidell, 1978; Adelberg and Currie, 1987), and that male and female patterns of both crime and substance use are very different (Provine, 1987; Ferrence and Whitehead, 1980).

The focus of this chapter is women's criminal behavior related to drug use. This includes the woman's role as a consumer of illicit drugs, as a potential distributor (seller, dealer) in the illegal market, and as an offender if she is arrested for drug possession or trafficking. The first area of investigation considers women primarily as experimenters or recreational users of illicit drugs.

Also considered are the crimes, mainly prostitution, that addicted women are thought to commit in order to obtain drugs. Indeed, the limitations of available research are highlighted in Adler and Simon's comment that "what research has been done on females and drugs has been largely within the purview of the literature on prostitution" (1979, p. 99). Therefore, this second group of studies is centered on female addiction as a cause or consequence of other criminal activities.

By way of introduction, we want to explore why the issue of legality, as opposed to illegality, is central to understanding female substance use. At the turn of the century, in

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the United States, twice as many women as men were addicted to opiate narcotics (Cuskey et al., 1972). The Harrison Act of 1914, which made narcotics illegal, shifted that ratio, and from approximately 1920 onward, male addicts outnumbered females by nearly two to one (Ferrence and Whitehead, 1980). What had been acceptable, or at least tolerated, quasimedical use became a forbidden activity.

A further example comes from Britain, where the medical model of addiction remained dominant until the 1960s (Trebach, 1982). Prior to 1962, the majority of British opiate addicts were women; since then, with increased emphasis on repression and control (i.e., heroin use has become a more deviant activity), male addicts have outnumbered females (d'Orban, 1970). Currently, in most Western countries, men are the heaviest users of cocaine, heroin, phencyclidine (PCP), cannabis, and other prohibited substances (Colten and Marsh, 1984; Ferrence, 1984). Men are also more likely than women to use alcohol and tobacco and to use them more frequently (Ferrence, 1984). Female drug use exceeds male use only for the medicinal and legal mood-modifying drugs, i.e., tranquilizers, barbiturates, and over-the-counter drugs (Cooperstock, 1976), and then only when obtained by prescription. Men dominate in illicit consumption, but *overall* drug consumption may not be very different for men and women (Kalant, 1980).

Female illicit drug users are doubly deviant. Not only do they break the law, they also participate in a predominantly male activity (Ferrence and Whitehead, 1980). It is instructive to examine the parallel course in the explanation of female deviance in the criminology literature. Female criminals have been variously described over the past 80 years as "devious, deceitful and emotional . . . intellectually dull and passive . . . closer to animals in evolution . . . immoral . . . lonely and dependent . . . [and] a pathetic lot" (Klein and Kress, 1976, p. 35). The deviant behavior of males and females was assumed to reflect different underlying processes and motivations (Smith and Paternoster, 1987). While men have been viewed as seeking monetary success, status, or peer acceptance through criminal pursuits, their female counterparts have been portrayed as personally or socially maladjusted or as the victims of biological imbalance (Smith and Paternoster, 1987). The current trend is away from gender-specific theories of deviance, toward more comprehensive explanations of deviant behavior in both males and females (see Hagan et al., 1985).

Men far outnumber women as perpetrators of crime and especially as committers of more serious and violent offences (Silverman, 1982). In the 1970s, a renewed interest in female crime provoked a flood of studies which assessed the convergence hypothesis—the notion that women were becoming more like men in the frequency and nature of offending. Adler's *Sisters in Crime* (1975) promoted the image of a new violent female criminal. Simon's (1979) assessment of arrest statistics for the period 1953–1974 indicated, however, that increases in female crime were concentrated in the category of property offenses. A more recent analysis (Steffensmeier, 1987) showed that this trend continued to 1985 (i.e., of increased female involvement in larceny, fraud, embezzlement, and forgery but not in violent, personal crime). The assessment of sex differences in crime occupies many researchers and is reviewed elsewhere (Adler and Simon, 1979). We turn now to our main topic—sex differences in illicit drug use—and consider recent evidence from surveys and community studies.