

More opportunity
equals more crime



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Crime is traditionally thought to be a male problem. Women are often left out of the criminology discussions. This is mainly because women are seen as the "fairer" or "weaker" sex. How can a dainty, submissive housewife commit as awful an act as robbing a bank or murdering her husband Surely these crimes are the sole territory of men. Incarceration rates seem to bear this out. Corrections facilities are filled with men, while women make up a small minority of those on the wrong side of the criminal justice system. At least, that was the case until recently. The numbers of women being arrested for committing crimes have increased dramatically over the past fifty years.

In 1953, 10.84 percent of women were arrested for a variety of crimes (Science News, 1975). By 1972, this number jumped to 15.27 percent (Science News, 1975). The numbers of monetary crimes perpetrated by women (embezzlement, counterfeiting, fraud, and forgery) also increased significantly during this same period (Science News, 1975; Sohoni, 1994). However, the rates of women participating in violent crimes stayed about the same (Science News, 1975; Sohoni, 1994). In the past twenty-five years, the rate of increase for female incarcerations has surpassed, and even doubled, the rate for male incarcerations (Sileo, 1993). Why is this sudden increase being seen Are more women suddenly turning to a life of crime Are women more evil than they were in years past

The definitive answer to this question is "no." Women have always committed crimes. It just seems that now the criminal justice system is getting better at catching and convicting the women who do commit crimes

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(Sileo, 1993). Also, women have more opportunities to interact outside the home than they did 50 years ago (Sileo, 1993). Since women are out in the workforce more than they used to be, it makes sense that there would be more instances of business-related crimes perpetrated by women. This is not to say, though, that if women in the past had had the same opportunities as women do today, that they would not have committed any of these crimes. Again, the rates of violent crimes committed by women have remained fairly stable over the years (Science News, 1975). This indicates that nothing significantly different is going on in women's minds regarding crime. Given the same opportunities, women can be as criminally minded as men. Another issue to consider is the fact that many women participate in crimes along with the men in their lives (Sileo, 1993). These women may be compelled out of love for the wrong type of man, or out of fear that if they don't comply, they will themselves become the victim of the criminal's wrath. In this case, then, women who might otherwise not become involved in criminal activity are forced into being accomplices to all sorts of crimes - even crimes against other women and children (Sileo, 1993). Since men commit the majority of crimes, if even half of the crimes have a female accomplice who is named, that will make the statistics for female crime increase exponentially.

Given what is known currently about women and crime, it would be premature to argue that the increase in female crimes is due to an increase in the actual numbers of women participating in crimes. There are a variety of economic and social factors that have influenced women's access to temptations to crime-evoking situations. Psychologically speaking, it does not make sense to think that women's minds and predispositions toward

crime have changed that much over the years. This is just not likely, especially when you consider that the rates of crimes perpetrated by men have not increased quite as dramatically in the same period of time (Science News, 1975). It is much easier, and much more accurate, to believe that women have always had it within them to participate in crimes. They just haven't always had the same opportunities.

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Section: BEHAVIOR

Women in crime, new opportunities

The world of crime has traditionally been a male preserve. The few women who were allowed to enter usually did so in a subservient role. They worked under the direction and guidance of men who were their lovers, husbands or pimps. In most instances, the woman's job was to entice victims, distract or look out for the police, carry the loot or provide cover. With the help of the women's liberation movement, this situation might change, says Rita James Simon of the University of Illinois. As a function of expanded consciousness, as well as occupational opportunities and widened horizons, women's

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participation, roles and involvement in certain areas of crime are expected to change and increase.

Women's participation in financial and white-collar offenses (fraud, embezzlement, larceny, forgery, etc.) should increase as their opportunities for employment in higher status occupations expand. Women's participation in crimes of violence, especially homicide and manslaughter, are not expected to increase. The reasoning here, says Simon, is that women's involvement in violent acts usually arises out of the frustration, subservience and dependency that have characterized the traditional female role. Case histories reveal a dominant pattern. When women can no longer contain their frustrations and their anger, they express themselves by doing away with the cause of their condition--most often a man, sometimes a child. But as employment and educational opportunities increase, women's feelings of victimization and exploitation will decrease and the motivation to kill will be muted.

Simon's theories are contained in "The Contemporary Woman and Crime," a new monograph published by the National Institute of Mental Health. Arrest statistics from 1953 to 1972, back up Simon's statements. In that 20-year period, the percentage of females arrested for all crimes rose from 10.84 to 15.27 percent. In serious crimes, the increase was from 9.40 to 19.25. In both burglary and larceny-theft, the percentage of females arrested more than doubled. In embezzlement and fraud, the percentage of arrests for females has gone from 18.4 to 29.7 percent; in forgery and counterfeiting, from 14.0 to 25.4 percent. During the same period, however, the percentage of women arrested for criminal homicide and aggravated assault has remained about the same.

Female criminality has been ignored almost completely by criminologists, law enforcement officials and community and clinical psychologists. Even the most recent texts on criminology devote, at best, only a few pages to women. This situation may have to change as women's role in crime changes. " If the present trend continues," says Simon, " in 20 years women will probably be involved in white-collar crime in a proportion commensurate with their representation in the society."

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crime in the comparative context of Western and Indian literature. It selectively reviews the findings of American and Indian studies of female crime and concludes with the author's own findings from a study of 120 women prisoners conducted in a federal women's prison in India. The author's main contention is that whereas broad contours of offender profiles can be drawn, it is difficult to draw statistically significant relationships and infer from them predictable variables of criminality. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

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Correlates of Female Crime

This article discusses the complexity of developing correlates of female crime in the comparative context of Western and Indian literature. It selectively reviews the findings of American and Indian studies of female crime and concludes with the author's own findings from a study of 120 women prisoners conducted in a federal women's prison in India. The author's main contention is that whereas broad contours of offender profiles can be drawn, it is difficult to draw statistically significant relationships and infer from them predictable variables of criminality.

As crime increases globally, predictability of crime and correlates of criminal behavior have become an area of growing concern among scholars and managers of deviance. Two major gains are associated with correlational studies in criminality. One is to assess whether a population's engagement in criminality is different from its participation in other socioeconomic areas of life. The other is to make safe predictions and assumptions about the future level of deviance in a society. The latter should provide a realistic basis to launch effective proactive and other policies to reduce criminality.

Traditionally, crime and deviance are perceived as planned and deliberate, or spontaneous and accidental responses to individual or societal pathology. Correlates of deviance and criminality can technically be traced both to the individual as well as the environment.

Individual factors surrounding deviance most commonly refer to socioeconomic and demographic variables including age, sex, race, marital status, education, income, and employability or skill level of the offender

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population. Offense-related variables include the nature of offense, recidivism, and personality and ethical profile of the offender. Treatment meted out to the offender by the criminal justice system is also pertinent as it helps to analyze how efficiently and appropriately the case is disposed. Failure to arrest, arrest but no charge, acquittal at trial, conviction, nature and length of sentencing - whether it leads to institutionalization or to extra-mural outcomes - are all relevant parameters to the study of offenders. So too, is the offender's treatment upon release by society, family, friends, and others.

Ecological factors that influence criminality include such extraneous aspects as the state of the economy and polity, prevailing social norms and conditions, and crime promoting and crime deterring forces as well as mechanisms in the environment. The choice of parameters varies from study to study although most commonly, the indicators studied in correlational studies of criminality are poverty, unemployment, level of modernization and urbanization, literacy, population density, and family system - whether married, single, divorced, one-parent, nuclear, or extended family. More recently, research is also looking into the hereditary aspects or the genetics of criminality.

The belief that a wide variety of factors in the socioeconomic environment are correlated with crime rates is widely held and is probably uncontroversial. What is debatable is whether these relationships can be correctly estimated, and in an identifiable causal form. Crime data are often sparse and not necessarily comparable across time and place. It is also unfair to equate correlation with causality. According to Ernest Van Den Haag (1976: 57), correlation is not the same as causation. " The crime rate in <https://assignbuster.com/more-opportunity-equals-more-crime/>

slums is indeed higher than elsewhere, but so is the death rate in hospitals. Slums, like hospitals attract people selectively. Both are locations not causes." Like the proverbial chicken and egg dilemma, it is difficult to attribute evidence of causality and sequentiality to co-existing or co-related variables.

In an early work, Clinard and Abbott (1973) raise pertinent concerns regarding the reliability of crime data. Among the more important issues they raise are:

whether official statistics reflect actual amount of crime;

whether changes in law enforcement and methods of recording affect an analysis of crime trends; and

whether characteristics of arrested offenders are really representative of those actually committing crimes.

The above concerns are further elaborated by Clinard and Abbott as follows.

Official Crime versus Actual Crime

Official crime data refer to arrest, court, and prison data, and data on crime "known to the police." The last are generally treated as the best available index although it is clear that all crimes that occur may not necessarily be reported to, or discovered by, the police. Each of the remaining indices are even less reliable. Arrest data rely heavily upon police efficiency and integrity. Police hold great discretionary powers to arrest or dismiss a suspect, and their decisions are influenced by the appearance, demeanor, race, and social status of the suspect; the type of crime; and the institutional and other facilities available to tackle and hold the arrest. As pointed out by Clinard and Abbott, court statistics in several countries are heavily influenced by the prosecutor's decision whether to go to trial. Other variables

such as availability of concrete evidence, public pressure, and the seriousness of the crime impinge on the disposition of each case.

The reliability of prison statistics as an index is also debatable since they are linked to the nature of sentencing decided by the court. Often the lack of prison facilities dictates the sentencing and the length of the prison term. In the poorer populations and countries particularly, inability to pay fines or bail affects incarceration rates as much as lack of availability of alternatives to sentencing. Prison data thus have limited value as an indicator of the total amount of crime in society.

Official crime data can at best be taken to indicate crime that is "known" or has "surfaced." Real incidence of criminality includes "hidden" crime for which only guesstimates are possible.

Efficacy of Law Enforcement

As Clinard and Abbott have noted, the efficiency of the law enforcement machinery has a close bearing on the measured criminality of society. A higher crime rate may be an outcome of higher availability of police and crime detection mechanisms or an offshoot of higher police capability and vigilance. As the vigilance and efficacy of the arrest and judicial processing machinery changes, so does the quantum of "known" criminality. Many countries or regions within countries typically suffer from inadequate systems of recording and methods of reporting crime, which affects their crime rates.

Differential Between Arrest and Conviction

Criminal data are not geared to record the impact of police discretion on who is arrested in the first instance. Violation of law does not uniformly lead to arrest or conviction. Inherent biases in the criminal justice systems of most

countries increasingly and disproportionately draw prisoners from the racially, socioeconomically, and culturally underprivileged groups. Clinard and Abbott note that when social inequalities and power considerations are present, law enforcement is likely to fit the status of the offender. The use of third degree methods to extract crime confessions is well-known, as is the fact of their being generally aimed at poor people. This raises critical questions regarding the representativeness of arrest and other criminal justice data. The arrested and convicted persons are not always representative of those actually committing the offenses.

Other Constraints in Assessing Criminality

When gauging prevailing or potential criminality or in correlating it to the environment, it is necessary to take into account the deterrent impact of prevalent social norms and criminal justice sanctions, as also crime preventative mechanisms. Ideally, provision should be made to measure variations in opportunities for crime. Societal perceptions of ethics and moral conduct; surpluses or shortfalls of goods and services; lax or stringent legislation and law enforcement; manner and speed of judicial processing and its punitive rigor are factors that affect the propensity for committing crime. As some scholars have observed, the probability of arrest given a crime, of conviction given an arrest, of imprisonment given conviction, and the mean time served in prison have a close bearing on criminality and its measurement.

Clinard and Abbott also make a useful distinction between crime incidence and prevalence. The former refers to the incidents or numbers of violations and the latter to numbers of offenders. As the two rates may vary independently, their rates of change may not be correlated.

Another limiting factor in measurement of crime arises from application of aggregate rates to a heterogeneous population. Rates defined as averages for given populations are at best crude estimates likely to conceal considerable variations within the populations. This is true also of rates of mortality, morbidity, literacy, poverty, etc. Moreover, variations in crime rates need to be standardized across time and place. Crimes against whites for instance would not occur in an all-black population. Caste- and untouchability-related offenses would be peculiar to India. Adjustment across time is well illustrated by the example of automobiles, televisions, or computers. Thefts or unauthorized use of these items were not a possibility before they were invented.

It is thus misleading to seek to definitively relate crime to a given set of indicators, especially keeping in view that the crime rate per se is a misleading gauge of a population's propensity for crime or its actual incidence.

Correlates of General or Non-Sex specific Crime

Notwithstanding the limitations noted, there is considerable and sustained interest in deciphering the correlates of crime. At the international level, comparative studies of crime rates have been attempted among others by Wolf (1971) Welford (1974) Radzinowicz (1977) and Clinard and Abbott (1973). Cross-country comparisons seek to rank various countries according to their stage of development, extent of criminality, and correlations of percent increase in development indicators with increase in total crime gauged mainly through arrest rates. Although the choice of development indicators varies, generally they include per capita income, population growth and density, size and composition of labor force, rates of

unemployment, life expectancy, literacy, urbanization, and overt manifestations of modernization such as electrical consumption, telephones, automobiles, etc.

Indian sources dealing with correlates of crime at the aggregate level are scant. In an exceptional work, Nayar (1975) explores the linkages between crime and the economy and polity in India. He tests the premise that there are systemic causes for variations in the incidence of violence and crime, and the changing incidence of crime is a reflection of a changed economic and political environment. Nayar selected twentyeight variables representing urban, rural, and total development, and administrative and political aspects. He chose five dependent variables from five crime groups -riots, offenses against person, property offenses with and without violence, and fraudulent practices. Using decadal (1959-1968) averages for three principal crime categories - offenses against public tranquility, person, and property - he ranked twenty Indian states according to what he termed their " level of domestic security." The levels were characterized as high, medium, and low. His analysis yielded an interesting tendency among the states to cluster according to regions. In other words, there appeared to be a regional character to the incidence of crime.

Nayar then related the crime incidence of states to the significant aspects of their social environment. Regression analysis confirmed the regional configuration of crime as follows:

- riots tended to have a higher incidence in the states with a lower degree of urbanization, or lower foodgrains production per capita in rural areas;
- offenses against the person as well as fraudulent practices were largely a function of the rate of growth of urbanization, except in the state of Manipur;

- property offenses with or without violence were somewhat related to the proportion of Scheduled Castes and Tribes in the population; and
- other socioeconomic variables did not seem important.

On the whole, Nayar proved his underlying premise that crime patterns and incidence do not operate independently of the socioeconomic and political environment.

At the micro level, that is, concerning a given group of criminals, more seems to have been done in India. Such work, however, is invariably dominated by male criminals who form an overwhelming majority of offenders in India. Micro-level studies mainly analyze prison populations by such factors as age, sex, education, marital status, religion, occupation, family life, and prior deviance. Works by Singh (1974) Srivastava (1977) and Adwani (1978) fall into this genre of studies. Singh chose a total of 850 male prisoners of whom 150 were recidivists from two central (federal) jails (Bhagalpur and Buxar). After studying various sociodemographic characteristics, Singh concluded that the typical non-recidivist male criminal is young (twenty-one to thirty years old), middle-born, literate, married, engaged in cultivation and therefore rural, and addicted to alcohol or other substance. He hails from a nuclear family with many siblings but no father, and is from a low-income bracket. He has experienced stern discipline at home and high conviction rates in his neighborhood. His crime is most likely committed in a group, and during summer months. Srivastava chose 400 male prisoners from the 1668 inmates of a central prison located in Lucknow. From the variables studied, his main conclusion is that a large proportion of long-term Indian male prisoners consist of youths and middle-aged persons,

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with onerous family liabilities, low literacy, low " political or economic security," and without a comfortable socioeconomic background. His typical offender, like Singh's, is an agriculturist, or horticulturist, or an artisan. Unlike Singh who found 93 percent of criminals belonged to nuclear families, Srivastava finds 90 percent emanating from joint families. There are similar contrasting findings with regard to the caste composition of inmates. Adwani who chose a mixed sample of 133 male and female prisoners from a total of 400 inmates of a federal prison in Rajasthan, along with 56 probationers, concludes that crime is mainly an urban affair, and that the highest number of offenses occur in the young age groups and the middle income groups. The studies quoted tend to affirm the difficulty in predicting a stereotypical offender even across three regions within the same country.

Correlates of Female Crime

In Western literature on criminality, works dealing with female crime are more numerous. Among them the earliest and/or important studies are by Lombroso (1899, 1958), Glueck and Glueck (1934), Pollak (1950), Smith (1962), Burkhart (1973), Adler (1975), Simon (1975) and Bowker (1978). Lombroso conceded that any search for a well-defined prototype of a delinquent woman was fruitless. The Gluecks studied 500 delinquent women and concluded that to a large extent they were " poor or at best only fair." Pollak felt that female criminality was not lower than male, but less visible and more leniently dealt with. In her study, Smith theorized the influences of such factors as age, marital status, sexuality, occupation, residence, race, and religion on female delinquency. Her conclusion was that whereas all factors have a certain influence, each working by itself is unlikely to sufficiently pressure a woman to divert from a law-abiding life to one of

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deviance and crime. Simon's study was less theoretical and more exhaustive, drawing on longitudinal arrest data (1953-1972) for the United States. Simon's main interest was to relate women's employment to female criminality. Greater female participation in white-collar crime was traced by her to women's altered position in the labor force. Among earlier scholars, Simon's work was exceptional also for attempting a comparative analysis of twenty-five countries over the period 1963-1970 with a view to assessing the extent of female crime, and whether the nature of crime has any link with the state of technological and economic advancement. Using arrest data to rank countries by the volume of crime, she was able to demonstrate higher growth rates of female criminality in some countries. However, her sample was too heterogeneous - ranging from Thailand, Tunisia, and the West Indies to England, France, and Germany - making it difficult for her to come up with any definitive conclusion about which type of society is conducive to a high female arrest rate. Moreover, although she demonstrated that female arrest for white-collar or financial crime occurs primarily in the technologically and economically developed countries, there was no conclusive evidence of crimes of violence occurring primarily in the developing countries or traditional societies.

Adler's work, in a sense, was a companion to Simon's study. Using original research conducted over several years, Adler examined the extent and nature of the changing patterns of female criminality in America, and explained the change in terms of increased female assertiveness. The roles of the women's liberation movement and of women's socioeconomic emancipation in changing crime patterns were considered. Using data from other countries, Adler established that as the socioeconomic disparity

between the sexes decreases, a correlative increase in female criminality occurs. She also contended that the developing countries are not immune to the phenomenon of rising female crime.

Quantitative techniques to analyze female crime data from a group of countries have been applied by Bowker (1978) and Widom and Stewart (1981). The latter analyzed female international crime data for 1972 from International Crime Statistics, 1971-72 published by Interpol, France. They calculated correlation coefficients between types of crime and twenty-two variables indexing the status of women. Their conclusion was that modernization indicators are generally associated with higher proportions of females arrested for sex crimes, and with higher proportions of females in total arrests.

Bowker compared international data for selected years from 1950-1972 to gauge variations in both the absolute level of female crime and female proportionate crime, that is, female crime divided by total crime in each arrest category. On the whole, Bowker did not detect any clear pattern of increase in proportionate female crime over the period 1950-1972. In absolute terms, female major larceny, that is, robbery and burglary as well as total crime arrests, were found to increase in more countries than countries in which they were on the decrease, while the converse was noted with respect to murders by females. When correlating crime to development indices, Bowker discovered that:

changes in proportionate female murder rates are inversely related to indices of socioeconomic development, and social and educational gender parity, but directly related to the index of economic equality; conversely, change in proportionate female major larceny rates are

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unrelated to all three sets of indices; and changes in proportionate female total crime are related only to socioeconomic development.

Taken together Widom, Stewart and Bowker suggest that modernization is associated with an increase in the female contribution to total crime, and is an important variable in understanding changes in female crime rates internationally. On the other hand, progress toward gender parity or equality seems to affect some types of female crime more than others. Further analysis by Bowker reveals female participation in economic activity to be more influential in their criminal behavior than their educational level, or the political and family institutions bearing on their status. She also concludes that correlational analysis offers only weak support for the theory of the new " violence-prone" female criminal, but considerably stronger support for both the economic " need" and economic " opportunity" theories.

Indian Sources on Correlates of Female Crime

Indian sources dealing with correlates of female crime are even sparser than those dealing with correlates of crime generally. Among those focusing on female crime, none deals with correlates of female crime at the national level. Micro studies of selected female prisoner groups exist, of which the better known are by Ahuja (1969) and Shastri (1976). Some elements of the female prisoner profile inferable from their studies can be briefly noted here. According to Ahuja, the incidence of crime is low in low caste, but high in low economic class. (About 88 percent of Hindu offenders in Ahuja's sample belong either to high or intermediate castes but 77 percent are from meager income families). Caste has no direct bearing on crime in Shastri's sample as well. In both studies, urban areas, especially those with high population

density, account for a majority of female offenders. Recidivism is minimal in Ahuja's sample - just one percent, whereas habituais account for one-fourth in Shastri's sample. From 60 percent (Shastri) to 80 percent (Ahuja) of offenders represent spot rather than premeditated crimes. Obviously, such a large proportion of offenses provoked by momentary impulse make it difficult to associate women's criminality with their upbringing. Yet in both studies, economic deprivation figures as one of the main causes for criminal activity.

A sociodemographic study of 120 prisoners from a women's prison in Yeravda (Pune, India) by the present author (Sohoni, 1989) looked at key sociodemographic variables in order to identify their possible relationship to female criminality. Variables were examined for possible association in relation to three principal offense groups - murder, theft, and miscellaneous.

Depending on its relevance to a particular variate, prostitution was analyzed separately from miscellaneous offenses.

The basic conclusion of the study was that female criminality does not easily lend itself to a stereotype. There is no typical profile or prototype of the Indian female convict. There are some reasonably identifiable characteristics, however, of individual offense types. Murder, more than any other offense, would be perpetrated by a married woman between twenty and forty years of age and more seldom than theft and miscellaneous offenses drawn from the younger age groups (fourteen to twenty-one-year-olds). Almost nothing in her demographic profile or socioeconomic background would have much bearing on her offense. Although more urban than the average female, she would be less urban and less literate than the female convicted of theft or miscellaneous offenses.

The female in the theft offense category would most likely be married. Unlike the offender in the murder category, she would be drawn from younger age groups that is, fourteen to twenty-one-year-olds, although to a lesser degree than the miscellaneous offender. Compared to murder, the theft offender would have experienced a greater incidence of marital separation, and a slightly lower incidence of out-of-wedlock children. The theft offender would be more literate than the murderer and the miscellaneous offender. She would be more urban than the murder offender, and experience a higher incidence of living alone. Economic deprivation would be more critical to the theft offender than to the murderer.

The miscellaneous offender would be more considerably drawn from the younger age group of fourteen to twenty-one than the murder or theft categories of offenders. She would be mostly married, experiencing separation to a greater degree than the other two categories of offenders, but with a lower incidence of illicit relations than both. She would be more urban than the murderer and as urban as the thief.

Occupationally, the miscellaneous offender would be considerably more associated with deviant professions than the other two categories, and there would be a lesser probability of her being a non-working housewife. As a result, her levels of income and expenditure would be higher than those of women in the other two categories.

In terms of parental upbringing, the miscellaneous offender would experience indifference to a greater extent, and normal upbringing to a lesser extent than the other two offender groups. Unhappy marital life and indifferent treatment from inlaws and husband would be more typical of the miscellaneous than of the other two types of offenders.

To conclude, it is clear from various studies - both Western and Indian - that offenders represent a variety of scenarios and no one scenario can be attributed to all female offenders. In the Yeravda study quoted previously, the compulsions that cause criminality were found to vary from one offender group to another. Poverty tended to affect or motivate theft more than other offenses. Personal factors, particularly amorous involvements, seemed to have weighed more with the murder offenders. A less positive handling of the respondent by her family, and the nature of her relationship with them, may have been the start of the miscellaneous offender's inroads into criminality.

Additionally, it is worth noting that whereas broad scenarios were inferable, the study did not point to statistically proven relationships. In other words, which factors affect what type of offense and to what degree was not definitively established. While this outcome is attributable to the small sample size, it also points to the intrinsic complexity of criminality as a social phenomenon, as well as to the inherent difficulty in identifying its correlates and constituents.

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