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## Female criminal careers

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## For a Gender Perspective within the Juvenile Justice System



AGIS 2006



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Edited by Elisabetta Ciuffo, Elisabetta Colla,  
Isabella Mastropasqua, Beatrice Roselletti



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This book provides the results of the Project "Gtjys Gender in Juvenile Justice System" – promoted by the Italian Juvenile Justice Department within the AGIS Programme – and some experts' point of view on the matter presented during the project final conference.

The Gtjys project was aimed at introducing "female" gender perspective in crime-prevention actions by analysing and exploring the phenomenon both qualitatively and quantitatively and by planning adequate action tools. If we deepen our knowledge of this field we can validate the adequacy of current practices and develop new strategies for our educational tasks.

The underlying idea of this European pilot study was to analyse the phenomenon of gender deviancy in the penal system of the 5 Partner States: its features, the types of relevant offences, the methods and possibly the efficacy of educational actions towards girls in the internal and external penal area.

Even though the phenomenon is not quantitatively important, it is a differently faceted critical area.

Yet micro-differences are crucial for a new definition of the educational scope of the penal action and are at the heart of the whole treatment system, especially with juveniles.

There are few extensive studies on "gender crime", on its features, motivations and social dynamics. If this is generally true, more than ever it is true in the smaller world of juvenile female offenders, which is our main target. This gender perspective deserves to be studied in depth, not only to fill a gap in European research but also to develop new socio-educational hypotheses to activate virtuous changes.

One of the results of the Project "Gtjys Gender in Juvenile Justice System" is the new perspective in the Juvenile Justice System of our Department.

\* Head of the Italian Juvenile Justice Department

# Female Criminal Careers

by *Georgia Zara\**

## 12.1

### Introduction

Female antisocial and criminal behaviour is not an unitary phenomenon, but it is a heterogeneous one, that is yet to be directly and specifically studied.

It is widely recognised that males are generally more antisocial than females (Campbell, 1990, 1991; De Leo, Patrizi, 1999, 2002; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, Silva, 2001; Rutter, Giller, Hagell, 1998), they commit crime more often, are more violent, and desist from offending later in life than females (Farrington, 2003). Female antisocial behaviour and violence is mainly addressed in comparative studies; male and female groups are mostly contrasted in order to pinpoint differences and similarities, and the male trend is employed as a meter to explain these differences or similarities in criminal careers (Canter, 1982; Smith, Paternoster, 1987). While the widely cited differences in rates and patterns of offending across gender are informative, this empirical practice does not allow for an accurate and direct examination of the extension of female criminality *per se* (Zara, 2000, 2002). Moreover, these types of aggregate levels of comparison do not allow for an examination of the onset and the evolution of delinquency and violent behaviour of women along their life-course (Lancôt, Émond, Le Blanc, 2004). The consequence of this is that the gender variable in criminal careers is yet to be fully explored.

## 12.2

### The focus: female criminality

Recent investigations (Leve, Chamberlain, 2004) have stated that females under the age of 18 comprise one of the fastest growing segments of the ju-

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venile-justice population. According to Rutter and colleagues (1998) the sex ratio is falling, «with young women accounting for the increasing proportions of officially recorder crimes. Although the rate is always higher for males, the ratio is now about a third of that observed 40 years ago» (p. 278).

The goal of scientific psychology and criminology research is to contribute to the understanding and explanation of how and why individuals, both males and females, think, feel, act and react, plan and address their lives. To explain female antisocial onset, offending continuity and discontinuity, we need to address antisocial and criminal patterns within a longitudinal dimension. The probability of criminal onset is not, however, the same for all female offenders, nor is the possibility of desisting from it. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that risk factors and processes often differ from one age to another, from one condition to another, from one group of people to another (Loeber, Farrington, 2001). It is plausible to adopt the criterion of individual differences because various configurations of cumulative risk apply differently to the initiation of criminal behaviour at an early age in comparison with an older age. Yet the prediction of delinquent and violent behaviour remains an inexact science and depends upon the risk-factors involved, not always directly identifiable.

The aim of this paper is to review the scientific literature and empirical evidence on female antisocial behaviour, and to address the importance of risk-based intervention. Some empirical queries will be a pre-amble for carrying out this investigation:

- Do we need a new paradigm to study female criminality?
- Are there risk factors and mechanisms that account more strongly for female offending than for male offending, and viceversa?
- What are the intervention strategies at work?

### 12-3

#### Criminal career paradigm

To address the first issue – Do we need a new paradigm to study female criminality? – it is sound to explore briefly how the implications of *sex* and *gender* differences could be integrated within criminal career research, and could make a contribution in understanding the gender variable in offending.

As the literature on *female criminal careers* is sparse and effectively still in its infancy, it might be important to start briefly acknowledging that female antisociality also requires to understand the distinction between the concepts of *sex* and *gender*. Research on the differences between women and men suggests that social and environmental factors,

rather than biological determinants per se, account for some of the behavioural differences between males and females (Moffitt *et al.*, 2001). Although purely physiological differences influence some biological processes affecting health and medical care, some of the observed behavioural differences are the result of differences in cultural representation of gender, gender socialization, gender and role stratification, and gender inequality (Bloom, Owen, Covington, 2003, 2004). Cheney-Lind (1997) affirmed that girls are likely to be absorbed in a culture of compliance and conformity, in which the ideology of domesticity and of inner-space (Emler, Reicher, 1995) may act as a buffer against deviant or antisocial influences.

Belknap (2001) explains that *sex differences* are biological differences, such as those concerning reproductive organs, body size, muscle development, and hormones, while *gender differences* are those that are ascribed by society and that relate to expected social roles (p. 11). They are neither innate nor unchangeable. These gender differences shape the socio-psychological reality of women's lives and the contexts in which they live, react, and construct their life (Bloom, Covington, 2000). As Bloom and Covington (2000, p. 11) advanced, an unbiased system for women would be gender-responsive if it included «an environment [...] that reflects an understanding of the realities of women's lives and addresses the issues of the women».

But if criminal justice policies continue to neglect these realities, the system will remain ineffective in targeting the pathways to offending that both impel women into a criminal career, and “in and out”, and again “in” the criminal justice system<sup>1</sup>.

The focus of this paper is to address female antisocial behaviour by adopting a *criminal career paradigm*.

The *criminal career paradigm* (Piquero, Farrington, Blumstein, 2003) will be of great use in exploring and understanding criminal behaviour committed by female offenders. Those researchers (Farrington, Painter, 2004) who have employed a life-course perspective to the study of female antisociality, and who analysed the data longitudinally, have begun to gather interesting findings for a risk-focused perspective.

A *criminal career* is the longitudinal sequence of offences committed by an individual in the course of their lives (Farrington, 1997). Hence, the *criminal career paradigm* (Piquero *et al.*, 2003) recognises that individuals start their criminal activity at a certain age, engage in crime at some individual crime rate, commit a mixture of crimes, and eventually stop. Hence, the criminal career approach emphasises the need to investigate issues related to why and when people start offending (*onset*), why and how they continue offending (*persistence*), why and if offending becomes

more frequent or serious (*escalation*) or specialised, and why and when people stop offending (*desistance*).

The age of onset is a crucial aspect when investigating a criminal career: the earlier the onset the longer, more serious and persistent the criminal career (Loeber, Farrington, 1998, 1998a, 2001, 2001a; Loeber, Farrington, Petechuk, 2003; Zara, 2005).

There appear to be ten widely accepted conclusions about the development of offending that can also shed some light on female involvement in a criminal pattern (cf. Farrington, 2005, pp. 5-6):

1. The age of onset of offending is most typically between the ages of 8 and 14, it being earlier with self-report data and later with official records, while the age of desistance from offending is most typically between 20 and 29 (though a small subset of offenders continue well into adulthood);
2. The prevalence of offending peaks in the late teenage years – between the ages of 15 and 19 (Rutter *et al.*, 1998). Despite most research findings are based either on a male or on a combined sample, specific studies on female antisocial behaviour (Moffitt *et al.*, 2001) have underlined that a similar trend in the peak of crime is also true for female engagement in delinquency;
3. An early age of onset predicts a relatively long criminal career duration and the commission of relatively more offences. International literature states that most serious and persistent forms of antisocial behaviour have an origin in childhood and early adolescence (Loeber, Farrington, 2001; Moffitt, 1993, 2003; Moffitt, Caspi, 2003; Robins, 1978). The implications of this statement, even if sound, are far-reaching. In fact, even though the best predictor of future behaviour has been found to be the past behaviour (Robins, Ratcliff, 1978), not every antisocial child will become an antisocial or criminal adult;
4. There is marked continuity in offending and antisocial behaviour from childhood to the teenage years and to adulthood. In other words, there is relative stability of the ordering of people on some measure of antisocial behaviour over time, and people who commit relatively many offences during one age range have a high probability of also committing relatively many offences during another age range (Farrington, 1986, 2005, 2005a);
5. A small fraction of the population (*chronic offenders*) commit a large fraction of all crimes. Chronic offenders tend to have an early onset, a high individual offending frequency, and a long, and serious criminal career (Farrington, West, 1993; Howell, 1995; Snyder, 1998; Wolfgang, Figlio, Sellin, 1972);
6. Offending is more versatile than specialised (Klein, 1984). Violent of-

fenders appear to offend frequently and to commit a variety of offences (Loeber, Farrington, 1998);

7. The types of acts defined as offences are elements of a larger *syndrome of antisocial behaviour* that includes promiscuous sex, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, heavy drinking, debts, family disruption, and so forth (Farrington, 2005b);

8. It appears that, as people enter adulthood, they change from group to lone offending. In fact, most offences up to the late teenage years are committed with others (co-offending), whereas most offences from age 20 onwards are committed alone (Reiss, Farrington, 1991);

9. The reasons given for offending up to the late teenage years are quite variable including sensation seeking, enjoyment, emotional and psychological ones (e.g. establishing one's own reputation and self-esteem), as well as utilitarian ones. From age 20 onwards, utilitarian motives become increasingly dominant (Farrington, 2005a);

10. Different types of offences tend to be first committed at distinctively different ages. This sort of progression is such that shoplifting tends to be committed before burglary, burglary before robbery and so forth. In general, diversification increases up to age 20, but after age 20, diversification decreases and specialisation increases (Farrington, 1997, 2003).

Despite being significant, these findings do not specifically explain gender differences in offending. Farrington and Painter (2004) advance that in order to create a tradition of studies on female criminal careers, we need:

- new theories about gender differences in offending;
- new theories to be tested using longitudinal surveys;
- new theories to predict which risk factors and risk mechanisms are more likely to account for female offending than for the male counterpart.

#### 12.4

##### Risk factors and mechanisms

Most longitudinal research on risk factors for offending has concentrated its attention on males because they commit most of the serious predatory and violent offences. This has resulted in gaps in the understanding of male *versus* female offending. Increased knowledge may help the development of differential preventative strategies, especially those based on targeting risk factors (Farrington, Painter, 2004; Storvoll, Wichstrom, 2002).

*Risk factors* are prior factors and conditions that increase the risk of occurrence of the onset, frequency, persistence or duration of offending (Kazdin *et al.*, 1997). Longitudinal data are required to establish the or-

defining of risk factors and criminal career features. Though some variables are thought to be conditions *sine qua non* for predicting involvement in crime and violence, their multiplicity suggests that none of them represent the key factor for explaining criminality, the persistence in it, its aggravation and escalation, and its desistance. If there were a single cause, there might also be a single "magic bullet" intervention approach. That would definitely simplify the philosophy of prevention. Numerous different conditions could lead to an antisocial maladjustment response to life (*equifinality principle*) (Gulotta, 1995, 2002; Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson, 1967) and one initial condition could lead to multiple behavioural responses (*multifinality principle*) (Cichetti, Rogosch, 1996; Zaza, 2003).

Research investigation should be focused on establishing which risk factors measured in childhood are likely to significantly predict the onset or prevalence of offending (Loeber, Keenan, Zhang, 1997; Nagin, Farrington, 1992). Few studies have examined risk factors for persistence or duration (Farrington, Hawkins, 1991; Nagin, Paternoster, 1991). Many risk factors tend to be inter-related, and it is of course necessary to investigate which factors are independent predictors of offending (Farrington, in press). Moreover, it is difficult to decide if any given risk factor is an indicator (symptomatic consequence) or a possible cause of offending. For example, are teenage pregnancy, drug-use, truancy, erratic work situation, high debt, and family conflicts and disruption, symptoms of an antisocial personality, or do they cause people to become more antisocial? (cfr. Farrington, in press). Similarly, to the extent that delinquency is a group activity, especially during adolescent years (Reiss, Farrington, 1991), and delinquents will usually have delinquent friends, this, however, does not necessarily show that being involved with delinquent friends is a cause of delinquency. Farrington (in press) strongly recommends that it is important not to include a measure of the dependent variable (e.g. delinquent friends) as an independent variable in causal analyses, because this will lead to false conclusions (Amdur, 1989).

Then, the next step is to address *what are the precipitating conditions that lead girls to begin a criminal career and to persist in it?*

In order to investigate this aspect, we focus the attention on scientific literature, to discover that the common findings are that:

- The majority of females participate in exploratory delinquency during their adolescence (Ageton, 1983; Lancôt, Le Blanc, 1999);
- Among young people whose criminal onset is early, the age of onset is markedly similar for both males and females. Moffitt and colleagues

(2001) indicated an antisocial male and female onset within six months of each other;

- It is unusual for females to persist in serious forms of delinquency (Ageton, 1983);

- Ayers and colleagues (1999) concluded that females who engage in serious forms of delinquency, such as violence, do so over a shorter period of time in comparison with males;

- From a developmental perspective, female life-course persistent offenders are rare (Caspi, Lynam, Moffitt, Silva, 1993; Moffitt, 2003);

- Research findings (Moffitt *et al.*, 2001) report that males have higher rates than females of the most significant risk factors for antisocial behaviour, including more compromised neuro-cognitive impairment status, higher levels of hyperactivity and impulsivity, and more peer problems;

- A low level of persistency in delinquent behaviour was also found among adjudicated female youth (Lancôt, Le Blanc, 1999, 2002), and even when at a high risk of persisting in delinquency and violent behaviour, relative few females did so (Maughan *et al.*, 2000);

- Females report a shorter criminal career, and tend to desist earlier in their adulthood (Rutter *et al.*, 1998);

- As for males, so for females, the delinquent acts that they commit are often but one of a multitude of manifestations of a *larger syndrome of antisociality* (Farrington, 2005b);

- Researchers have distinguished some factors that clearly influence antisocial behaviour, especially in females. Of the gender-specific factors that have been isolated, three particularly stand out: social forms of aggression (Vallancourt, Cote, Farhat, Boulerice, Le Blanc, Boivin *et al.*, 2002); attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Bates, Byles, Bennett, Ridge, Brown, 1991; Loeber, Keenan, 1994); early sexual development. All three may place girls in particular jeopardy for developing antisocial behaviours (Levene, Walsh, Augimeri, Pepler, 2004);

- The outcomes for adolescent girls with severe antisocial behaviour include various negative health and mental health risks, including participation in health-risking sexual behaviour, psychopathological problems, substance dependence, school dropout, mortality, and continued criminal behaviour (Leve, Chamberlain, 2004; Moffitt, Caspi, 2001; Moretti, Odgers, Jackson, 2004);

- Another influential risk-factor that was found significant is the quality of caregiver-daughter interaction, particularly her same sex-parent. The more dysfunctional, the higher the risk of manifesting antisocial behaviour (Levene *et al.*, 2004);

- Antisocial adolescents, both males and females, tend to build up in-



timate relationships with partners who are antisocial themselves, have less education, and who are abusive towards partners and other family members (Farrington, 1997; Moffitt *et al.*, 2001);

- There is some significant evidence that in most cases antisocial adolescents are likely to come from a criminal household, with at least a member of the family (e.g. parent or siblings) who was convicted (Cernkovich, Giordano, 1987; Datesman, Scarpitti, 1975; Farrington, 1995; Farrington, 2002; Farrington, Barnes, Lambert, 1996; Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Kalb, 2001; Farrington, Lambert, West, 1998; Rowe, Farrington, 1997).

## 12.5 A longitudinal analysis of gender differences in offending

In accordance with a complete overview of the development of female offending behaviour, it may be interesting to turn the attention to family factors, so as to conceptualize the reality of crime. Farrington and Painter (2004) examined how effective risk factors were in predicting gender differences in offending. To do so the brothers and sisters of the males in the *Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development* were examined (Farrington, 2003; West, Farrington, 1973, 1977). By comparing boys and girls in the same families, many other social influences on offending such as those of neighbourhood and community were controlled (Farrington, Painter, 2004). The main aims of their research were to:

- investigate similarities and differences in risk factors for offending (as measured by convictions) of boys and girls;

- compare criminal careers of males and females in the same families.

The analyses were based on 397 families containing 397 study males, 494 brothers (of whom 218 were offenders), and 519 sisters (of whom 63 were offenders). The risk factors for offending early (onset of offending before the age of 17) and those for *frequent offending* (four or more convictions for brothers, two or more convictions for sisters) were studied. The results showed that the prevalence of convictions for criminal offences was much higher for brothers, at 44, than for sisters, at 12%, and that brothers committed offences more frequently, an average of 4.3 offences per brother offender *versus* 2.8 for sister offender. While a high proportion of brothers committed burglary (20% of brothers' offences; 6% of sisters' offences) and theft of vehicles (13% of brothers' offences; 4% of sisters' offences), sisters committed shoplifting (28% of sisters' offences; 6% of brothers' offences) and deception offences (27% of sisters' offences; 12% of brothers' offences) (Farrington, Painter, 2004).

Farrington and Painter (2004) indicated that convicted sisters were a

smaller fraction of the cohort (12%) and therefore a more extreme and distinctive group than convicted brothers (44%). The 63 convicted sisters were compared with 66 brothers who had four or more convictions (the so called *frequent offenders*). Even though this accounted for part of the gender difference in predictive accuracy, it did not account for all of it. The most important risk-factors that were found significantly similar for brothers and sisters were found in:

- a convicted father, a convicted mother, and/or a convicted delinquent sibling;
- parental conflict;
- low family income;
- large family size;
- separation from a parent;
- harsh or erratic parental discipline;
- poor parental supervision;
- attending a high delinquency rate school.

Although these are significant similarities, there were some gender differences, which deserve to be explored in detail. The factors which predicted offending more strongly for sisters were:

- socio-economic risk factors such as low social class, low family income, and poor housing;
- child-rearing risk factors such as low praise by the parents, harsh or erratic discipline, poor parental supervision, parental conflict, low parental interest in education, and low paternal interest in the children.

The risk factors that predicted offending more strongly for brothers

were:

- parental risk factors such as nervous fathers and mothers;
- poorly educated fathers and mothers.

Convicted fathers and mothers were equally important predictors for brothers and sisters, and there was no tendency for mother risk factors to be more important for sisters and father risk factors to be more important for brothers (Johnson, 1987).

Even though the absolute number of offences was greater for males than for females, due to the higher prevalence of male offending, the stronger effect of risk factors for sisters compared with brothers has important implications for risk-focused prevention of female offending:

- 22% of sisters from low-income families were convicted (at any age) compared with 6% from higher income families;
- 54% of brothers from low-income families were convicted (at any age) compared with 37% from higher income families.

Socio-economic and child-rearing factors were more important for

sisters and parental characteristics were more important for brothers (Farrington, Painter, 2004). These findings are in line with past research that shows that family-based prevention techniques, targeting risk factors, can be effective in reducing offending (Farrington, 2002, 2003). More studies are necessary to replicate these findings.

## 12.6

### Conclusions

The present analyses suggest that family-based intervention can have some effective influence in preventing or, at least, in controlling, especially, female offending. Parent training, parent education techniques, which target parental competence and supervision, parental involvement in child education and in the everyday life of the child, are likely to have a proportionally more significant impact in reducing female offending than in reducing male offending (especially early onset offending). Similarly, interventions designed to reduce family poverty are likely to have proportionally more impact in reducing female offending.

Approaches to crime prevention are differentiated. Tonry and Farrington (1995) and Farrington (in press) distinguished four major prevention approaches:

1. *Risk-focused prevention*<sup>3</sup> refers to interventions designed to prevent the development of criminal potential in individuals, by especially targeting those risk and protective factors discovered in studies of human development (Farrington, 1997; Tremblay, Craig, 1995);
2. *Community prevention* refers to interventions designed to change the social conditions and institutions (e.g. families, schools, peers, social norms, clubs, organizations) that influence offending in residential communities (Hope, 1995);
3. *Situational prevention* refers to interventions designed to prevent the occurrence of crimes by reducing opportunities, with an intervention within the more at risk environments, and increasing the risk and difficulty of offending (Clarke, 1995);
4. *Criminal justice prevention* refers to traditional deterrent, incapacitate and rehabilitative strategies operated by law enforcement and criminal justice system agencies.

These four strategies cannot have any effect if they act in a solo situation. Tackling criminality in general, and the female one in particular, requires a systematic, integrated, and evidence-based, multidimensional approach (Welsh, Farrington, 2002, 2006), in which the psychological, familiar and social factors are taken together into consideration (Zara, 2006). The recommendation, to use an expression of Moffitt and col-

leagues (2001, p. 245), is to redouble efforts to examine, understand, and address, both individual differences and social contexts. Some physiological (e.g. early menarche onset) (Caspi, Moffitt, 1991, 2003) and psychological and emotional (e.g. child abuse) (Maxfield, Widom, 1996) factors may, in fact, play a significant risk for female antisocial manifestations, but family and social contexts, as research findings show (Farrington, Painter, 2004; Offord, 1982), have a significant share of risk influence in affecting female criminal careers.

Female criminality should be investigated not as a homogeneous phenomenon and subgroup, because not all female offenders share the same common pathway of involvement in crime. It is significant, from a preventive point of view, to identify distinct pathways, each representing patterns of development and risk factors that characterise the complexity and heterogeneity of criminal careers.

### Notes

1. For a more detailed analysis of these aspects we direct the reader to the specialised literature.
2. The Cambridge Study is a longitudinal survey of the development of offending and antisocial behaviour in 411 males who were first contacted in 1961-62.
3. This definition is the one addressed in criminal career research, and is now used more generally than *developmental prevention* originally employed by Tonry and Farrington (1995). The two terms essentially have the same meaning (cf. Farrington, in press).

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## Adolescence and Antisocial Behaviour<sup>13</sup>

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There are different theories referring to the causes of antisocial behaviour in adolescence and it needs a reflection about the theoretical paradigms on the organization of the interventions concerning teenagers who are involved in criminal proceedings within the Juvenile Justice.

During the last years the contradistinction between the sociological and the psychiatric or psychopathological point of view declined, a contradiction that often obstructed an integral approach. The understanding of the psychological and social factors that contribute to the development of antisocial behaviour in adolescence tends to move towards a better integration of differently orientated theories, even if a sufficient organicity is not yet reached. Exploring antisocial behaviour it has been commonly agreed with the substantial role of a combination of negative interactions in education from the first childhood on and an individual predisposition, based on personal characteristics like negative attitudes, difficulties with self-control and insensibility. The interaction between those elements leads to the construction of certain disturbed mechanisms of expectations regarding interpersonal relations, to being hostile or persecutory, which at the end causes behavioural problems. The mentioned systems of self-representation and representation of others become of crucial importance in the moment of self-redefinition in adolescence, during the process of the construction of a social identity, when the teenager shows antisocial behaviour as a strategy to construct his social identity. The manifestation of antisocial behaviour depends on the motivations and on individual values (ideals) of the teenager and his expression of aims, connected to the evolutive challenges in adolescence, declining in relation to the opportunities present in the environment.

One of the most discussed issues regarding the confrontation of current paradigms is the contribution of psychopathology to adolescent delinquency. In the last years a more systematic research on the relation between

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