

Not Just a Boy's Club: An Empirical Assessment of Female Career Criminals

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ABSTRACT. The extant literature suggests that habitual criminality among women is rare and that female career criminals are ostensibly nonexistent. Using the criminal records of 500 male and female adult recidivists, this study applies the concept of career criminality to women and describes how this application has specific gendered elements. Like their male peers, women are chronic, versatile offenders engaged in violent, property, and public-order offending. Women are disproportionately engaged in forgery, fraud, and prostitution whereas men are disproportionately engaged in rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. No gender differences existed for a variety of additional offenses and criminal justice system statuses. However, significant gender differences exist for social demographic characteristics, such as age and timing of onset, and criminal career parameter indicators, such as span of criminal career. These data and analyses indicate that the career criminal classification has important implications for criminal career research and gender-based criminology. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Habitual criminality, career criminal, gender, female offenders, male offenders

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INTRODUCTION

In every aspect of criminological inquiry, more attention is accorded the criminal behavior of males than females (Heidensohn, 1997). Indeed, the dearth of research investigating female criminality has been characterized as the "invisibility doctrine" (Baro & Eigenberg, 1993; Belknap, 1996). This research gap is particularly pronounced in criminal career research, specifically the examination of habitual or career offending. For instance, prior researchers have questioned "whether the term career criminal even applies to women" (Warren & Rosenbaum, 1987, p. 393). The current research attempts to fill this void by examining the empirical evidence of female career criminals and the ways in which gender influences habitual criminal behavior.

GENDER, RECIDIVISM, AND CAREER CRIMINALITY

Chronic offenders demonstrate problematic behavior across the life-course. The typical life history of a habitual criminal is characterized by conduct disorders and incorrigibility during childhood, juvenile delinquency, educational failure, and substance use during adolescence, and chronic unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, and periods of incarceration during adulthood. Employing a variety of research designs (e.g., prospective, longitudinal, birth cohort designs, and cross-sectional surveys), data (e.g., general population and offender samples), and methods of analysis (e.g., bivariate and multivariate analyses), researchers have found that gender is a robust predictor of whether an individual will chronically offend. Males are overwhelmingly more likely than females to engage in career criminality (Dean, Brame, & Piquero, 1996; Hamparian et al., 1978; Kempf, 1988; Piper, 1985; Robins & O'Neal, 1958; Shannon, 1991; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972; Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987). Because this gender effect is so tenacious, many investigators excluded females from their samples based on the assumption that women do not contribute enough variation on crime-related dependent variables (Brennan, Mednick, & John, 1995; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995; Farrington & West, 1993; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972).

Although serious offending among women is rare, a handful of studies have examined the subject.¹ Warren and Rosenbaum (1987) examined the offending careers of 159 women who had been incarcerated in California during the 1960s. They found that, like male recidivists, female offenders demonstrated continuity in offending throughout the life-course and committed an array of offenses. Women were primarily involved in property crime, prostitution, and drug viola-

tions. Sommers and colleagues (1994) studied the desistance processes among 30 women with extensive prior criminal records. These women had high ever-prevalence levels for a variety of serious crimes including robbery (63%), burglary (60%), weapons offenses (77%), drug selling (94%), prostitution (47%), and forgery (60%). Eighty-three percent of the female offenders had been incarcerated, with a median of three prior prison sentences (Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 1994). The authors found that criminal careers did not terminate until the women made a concerted effort to escape the criminal lifestyle, and, more importantly, break free from drug networks.² Based on analysis of the offending histories of 1,076 incarcerated female felons, Danner and colleagues (1995) found that female chronic offenders were disproportionately young, single, minority, and, most significantly, heavy drug abusers. Finally, in their review of this brief literature, Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) concluded that compared to the criminal careers of men, women engaged in less serious forms of crime and accumulated fewer arrests.

Based primarily on official measures such as the *Uniform Crime Reports*, additional research has indicated that female offending careers consist primarily of arrests for theft, DUI, and miscellaneous traffic violations. These three violations comprise 49% of all female arrests and 48% of all male arrests (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Furthermore, women are most likely to be arrested for forgery, fraud, and prostitution (Gilfus, 1992; Hindelang, 1979; Jurik, 1983; Steffensmeier, 1993; Steffensmeier & Cobb, 1981; Warren & Rosenbaum, 1987). These crimes are often instrumental means to obtain illicit drugs. Serious drug addiction is more prevalent among female than male offenders. Moreover, one in three female state prisoners reported that they committed their most recent criminal offense to obtain money for drugs (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999). In short, drug dependence and crime are tightly connected, and this nexus is vital for explanations of female criminality (Maxwell & Maxwell, 2000).

Women's involvement in the most serious crimes, such as murder and armed robbery, demonstrates dissimilarities to males' involvement in such offending. For example, female-perpetrated homicide is more commonly against an intimate or other family member. From 1976 to 1997, 60% of female-offender murders, compared to 20% for male-offender murders, were against a victim with whom the offender had a primary relationship. During the same period, just 1 in 14 murders by a female offender were against a complete stranger, compared to 1 in 4 murders committed by a male (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999). Recent research has further demonstrated the nuance and complexity that gender adds to involvement in criminogenic street-culture (Miller, 1998; Miller & Brunson, 2000) and the commission of violent crimes such as murder and robbery (Baskin & Sommers, 1993; Danner et al., 1995; Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 1994). De-

spite this general epidemiological information, little is known about the role of drug, property, and violent offending among females in a career context.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The empirical gender disparities in criminality largely exist in a theoretical vacuum. This is especially true for criminal career research that is more a framework of empirical study than an explicit theoretical perspective (Blumstein et al., 1986; Weiner, 1989). Three general theoretical frameworks have guided research since 1975. The liberation-empowerment thesis (Adler, 1975; Simon, 1975) suggested that female involvement in crime would increase and converge with male prevalence due to gender equality brought on by the Women's Movement. This thesis sparked a flurry of research (e.g., Deming, 1977; Harris, 1977; Hindelang, 1979; Jensen & Eve, 1976; Klein & Kress, 1976; Simon & Baxter, 1989; Smith & Visher, 1980; Steffensmeier, 1978, 1980; Steffensmeier & Cobb, 1981). Although some studies found that sex ratios in arrest were converging, particularly for crimes such as larceny, the absolute levels of female crime still paled compared to males. Since this initial debate, two theoretical camps regarding female criminality have emerged. One focuses on the qualitatively and quantitatively unique position that females occupy in society, suggesting that the female motivation, opportunity, and expression of crime are intrinsically different than males (e.g., Belknap, 1996). The other focuses on the social structural constraints and opportunities that predict female and male crime (e.g., Hagan, Gillis, & Simpson, 1985; Hagan, Simpson, & Gillis, 1987). Unfortunately, the current study lacks the structural variables necessary to adequately test one of these theoretical perspectives (c.f. Heimer & De Coster, 1999). Instead, the current research is an empirical assessment of habitual female criminality with some inductive speculation regarding theory located in the discussion.³

Virtually nothing is known about habitual female criminals. Do such offenders exist? If so, are habitual female criminals dangerous? What types of crimes do female career criminals commit? What are the prevalence of Index and lesser types of offending? Are serious female criminals chronically under criminal justice system supervision? This study seeks to answer these questions and further the empirical evidence of chronic offending among females.

METHODOLOGY

Data are the official criminal records of a population of 500 adult offenders with a minimum of 30 arrests. This arrest criterion qualifies defendants for ha-

bitual offender status, a decision reached by the chief district judge and district attorneys office in the jurisdiction where these data were collected. Official records were produced from the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) computer database that contains arrest and judicial information from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, federal, state, local, and foreign criminal justice agencies. Arrest charges followed the guidelines of Part I and II offenses in the *Uniform Crime Reports*.⁴ Inchoate crimes such as accessory, attempt, complicity, conspiracy, and solicitation are also included. In addition to crime, an array of additional information that is potentially useful for researchers can be gleaned from NCIC records. These include demographic characteristics such as age, sex, and race in addition to criminal career parameters such as length of career (span), initiation of career (onset), and the annual offending rate (lambda). Other rap-sheet indicators such as aliases, dates of birth, places of birth, and social security numbers measure the degree to which offenders lie to criminal justice personnel (see DeLisi, 2000a).

All criminal defendants who were detained in the jail and processed by a pre-trial service unit were investigated using the NCIC database. Data collection occurred from 1995 to 2000 at a large urban adult jail in the western United States. During this tenure, 25,640 defendants were processed, with 500 offenders (2%) having at least 30 arrests. Fifty-five of the offenders were female, 445 were male. Descriptive statistics for all offenders, their involvement in the criminal justice system, and criminal career parameters and demographic characteristics are included in Table 1. The data are presented by three methods. Comparison of means t-tests are used to assess sex differences for demographic and criminal career parameters (Table 2). Due to the categorical independent variable (gender) and multiple, positively correlated, continuous dependent variables (offense counts), multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) is used to examine potential influence of gender on criminal careers (Tables 3 and 4). Additionally, in an effort to add context to these offending careers, qualitative criminal history vignettes are also provided.⁵

FINDINGS

Social Demographics and Career Parameters

Female recidivists were younger ($t = 1.78, p = .075$) than their male criminal peers. The average female offender age was 37 years, nearly three years younger than the chronic male offender. The age range for females was 20 to 64 years, and 18 to 74 years for males. Race and ethnicity of the census offenders varied by gender. Habitual female offenders were more ethnically diverse than their

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics Arrests, Criminal Justice Status, and Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Mean	Females (n = 55)		Males (n = 445)		
		Std. Deviation	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Range
Total Arrests	47.84	16.34	30-91	61.24	31.66	30-267
Violent Arrests	1.07	1.76	0-10	3.96	4.59	0-43
Property Arrests	9.80	10.01	0-59	13.61	13.46	0-104
Felony Convictions	4.11	4.25	0-19	5.79	5.12	0-33
Prison Sentences	2.07	2.56	0-10	3.65	4.43	0-28
Murder	0.07	0.26	0-1	0.12	0.40	0-3
Rape	0	0	0	0.45	1.84	0-31
Robbery	0.18	0.75	0-5	0.89	1.87	0-14
Aggravated Assault	0.82	1.63	0-10	2.37	2.73	0-16
Kidnapping	0	0	0	0.12	0.47	0-4
Burglary	1.89	3.33	0-19	4.30	5.06	0-35
Theft	7.40	8.53	0-52	7.44	9.93	0-84
Auto Theft	0.47	1.20	0-6	1.76	2.92	0-24
Arson	0.04	0.19	0-1	0.10	0.49	0-6
Disorderly Conduct	2.71	3.62	0-18	6.24	7.03	0-54
Domestic Violence	1.35	2.38	0-11	1.36	2.69	0-16
Drug Possession/Use	4.84	6.52	0-31	4.56	8.60	0-102
Drug Sales/Trafficking	0.44	6.52	0-10	0.83	2.65	0-26
DUI	2.05	2.48	0-9	2.38	3.00	0-17
Embezzlement	0	0	0	0.02	0.16	0-2
Escape	0.53	1.17	0-6	0.55	1.30	0-14
Failure to Appear	7.78	6.22	0-20	8.79	8.68	0-71

Failure to Comply	2.95	3.51	0-15	3.98	4.88	0-33
Forgery	3.53	6.02	0-32	0.85	2.74	0-29
Fraud	3.87	6.16	0-37	1.73	3.07	0-34
Prostitution	3.16	10.35	0-70	0.21	3.21	0-66
Sexual Offenses	0	0	0	0.36	1.75	0-27
Stolen Property	0.05	0.41	0-3	0.33	1.29	0-17
Vagrancy	0.44	1.23	0-5	4.15	10.18	0-73
Weapons Offenses	0.20	0.56	0-3	1.11	2.01	0-20
Age	37.18	8.44	20-64	39.91	10.96	18-74
Onset of Arrest	20.67	7.28	10-57	18.39	5.02	8-46
Span	16.51	7.25	6-39	21.52	9.81	4-53
Lambda	3.37	2.22	0.97-14.67	3.32	2.41	0.38-16.29
Number of States Arrested	1.89	1.47	1-9	3.02	2.91	1-25
Aliases	9.53	10.47	0-51	7.49	8.95	0-55
Social Security Numbers	2.65	2.06	1-11	2.78	2.37	0-14
Dates of Birth	2.47	2.45	1-10	2.51	2.54	1-20
Places of Birth	1.40	0.63	1-3	1.60	1.05	1-9
Race/Ethnicity	40% White 29% Hispanic 18% African American 13% Native American 0% Asian American	54% White 29% Hispanic 11% African American 5% Native American 1% Asian American				

TABLE 2. Comparison of Means for Social Demographics and Criminal Career Parameters

Variable	Females (n = 55)	Males (n = 445)	t	p
Age	37.18	39.91	1.78	.075
Onset of Arrest	20.67	18.39	3.01	.003
Span	16.51	21.52	3.67	.000
Lambda	3.37	3.32	0.15	.878
Number of States Arrested	1.89	3.02	2.83	.005
Aliases	9.53	7.49	1.56	.118
Social Security Numbers	2.65	2.78	0.37	.708
Dates of Birth	2.47	2.51	0.11	.913
Places of Birth	1.40	1.60	1.35	.176

TABLE 3. MANOVA for Part I Index Offenses, Felony Convictions, and Prison History

Variable	Females (n = 55)	Males (n = 445)	F	p
Total Arrests	47.84	61.24	9.53	.002
Violent Index Arrests	1.07	3.96	21.34	.000
Property Index Arrests	9.80	13.61	4.12	.043
Felony Convictions	4.10	5.79	5.44	.020
Prison Sentences	2.07	3.65	6.69	.010
Murder Arrests	0.07	0.12	0.77	.382
Rape Arrests	0	0.45	3.32	.069
Robbery Arrests	0.18	0.89	7.65	.006
Aggravated Assault Arrests	0.82	2.37	17.16	.000
Kidnapping Arrests	0	0.12	3.79	.052
Burglary Arrests	1.89	4.30	11.84	.001
Theft Arrests	7.40	7.44	0.00	.976
Auto Theft Arrests	0.47	1.76	10.51	.001
Arson Arrests	0.04	0.09	0.87	.352

male counterparts. In particular, the female offender group was 40% White, 29% Hispanic, 18% Black, and 13% American Indian. Comparatively, the male offender group was 54% White, 29% Hispanic, 11% Black, 5% American Indian, and 1% Asian American. The same minority overrepresentation among female offenders appears in imprisonment data (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999).

TABLE 4. MANOVA for Non-Index Offenses

Variable	Females (n = 55)	Males (n = 445)	F	p
Disorderly Conduct Arrests	2.71	6.24	13.44	.000
Domestic Violence Arrests	1.35	1.36	0.00	.961
Drug Possession/Use Arrests	4.84	4.56	0.05	.818
Drug Sales/Trafficking Arrests	0.44	0.83	1.17	.281
DUI Arrests	2.05	2.38	0.60	.440
Embezzlement Arrests	0	0.02	0.66	.415
Escape Arrests	0.53	0.55	0.02	.899
Failure to Appear Arrests	7.78	8.79	0.70	.405
Failure to Comply Arrests	2.95	3.98	2.30	.130
Forgery Arrests	3.53	0.85	33.08	.000
Fraud Arrests	3.87	1.73	17.90	.000
Prostitution Arrests	3.16	0.21	20.49	.000
Sexual Offenses Arrests	0	0.36	2.39	.123
Stolen Property Arrests	0.05	0.33	2.49	.115
Vagrancy Arrests	0.44	4.15	7.29	.007
Weapons Arrests	0.20	1.11	11.02	.001

Chronic female offenders had a later onset age of arrest ($t = 3.01$, $p = .003$), shorter criminal career ($t = 3.67$, $p = .000$), and were arrested in fewer states ($t = 2.83$, $p = .005$) than their male peers. Female and male career criminals committed approximately equal amounts of offenses per year ($t = 0.15$, $p = .878$). Chronic offenders in this study, regardless of gender, accrued three arrests per year for the entirety of their criminal career. On average, women were first arrested at age 21, whereas men were first arrested at age 18. Both onset parameters are later than the extant literature has generally shown. This finding should be interpreted with some caution since the NCIC has limited reliability pertaining to access to juvenile records. It is very likely that persons with serious arrest records during early adulthood had a "true" onset of criminal behavior during childhood or adolescence (Dean, Brame, & Piquero, 1996; Moffitt, 2001; Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995). The average duration of the offending career was 16.5 years for females and 21.5 years for males. Taken together, these parameters imply that the study of habitual criminal conduct should not be limited to adolescence as any prior criminal career researchers have suggested (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 1993; Tracy & Kempf-Leonard, 1996). Criminal histories for both an early onset and later onset female offender appear below.

White female was first arrested at age 14 (current age is 20). She had an extensive juvenile arrest record for a variety of offenses, including six theft arrests, three vandalism arrests, five drug use arrests, and eight failures to appear for these cases. The defendant was never adjudicated of a felony during adolescence. Upon adulthood, she accumulated 11 arrests for theft, two arrests for forgery and fraud, five prostitution arrests, and 26 arrest charges for drug use/possession. She received probation (two counts of forgery/fraud) for which she was non-compliant on seven occasions and, ultimately, sentenced to four years in prison.

The late starter similarly demonstrated the criminal versatility commonly found among serious offenders.

White female was first arrested at age 19 (current age 31). The defendant demonstrated an immersion in criminal lifestyle evidenced by 22 aliases, nine social security numbers, and arrest activity in three states on her NCIC record. From age 19 to 24, she was arrested for six counts of burglary, one count of auto theft, two counts of simple assault, six counts of prostitution, two counts of fraud, four counts of disorderly conduct, and five failure to appear violations. She was convicted of two counts of burglary and sentenced to two years (served concurrently) in prison. After release, her criminality escalated. Over a five-year period, she accumulated three arrests for aggravated assault, 13 arrests for burglary, five arrests for auto theft, four arrests for simple assault, five arrests for drug use/possession, one arrest for forgery/fraud, two arrests for prostitution, one arrest for DUI, five arrests for disorderly conduct, eight arrests for theft, and six failure to appear and parole violations. She was convicted of 10 felonies (multiple counts of burglary and theft) and was sentenced to four concurrent prison terms totaling eight years.

Female career offenders were less migratory than men in terms of accumulating arrests in multiple jurisdictions. The average female chronic offender was arrested in just over one state (range 1 to 9 states), whereas the average male chronic offender was arrested in over three states (range 1 to 25 states).

Criminal justice personnel identify offenders using additional rap-sheet indicators such as aliases, social security numbers, dates of birth, and places of birth or nativity. Multiple forms of these identifiers indicate attempts that offenders have made to elude police detection. For example, offenders with an active warrant might employ an alias and alternative date of birth to avoid arrest. The parameters indicate that habitual offenders, regardless of their gender, are generally likely to employ numerous methods of deception to avoid arrest (DeLisi, 2000a). On average, female offenders employed 9.53 aliases while male offenders employed 7.49 aliases ($t = 1.56, p = .118$). Offenders also used nearly three

social security numbers ($t = 0.37, p = .708$), nearly three dates of birth ($t = 0.11, p = .913$), and over one place of birth ($t = 1.35, p = .176$). Although no statistical gender differences existed, these substantive findings coincide with the traditionally high female prevalence in crimes such as forgery and fraud—offenses that often rely on the use of multiple forms of personal identification. Comparison of means output for social demographics and criminal career parameters appears in Table 2.

Cumulative Criminal Involvement and Index Offending

As indicated in Table 3, the criminality of these 500 offenders is prodigious. Further, these arrest records far exceed the offending careers of traditionally defined (5 or more arrests) chronic offenders (Hamparian et al., 1978; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972). As expected, female habitual offenders demonstrated less cumulative involvement in crime than male habitual offenders. Nevertheless, the evidence of serious recidivism among women is compelling. Female offenders averaged nearly 48 arrests over the life course compared to 61 arrests for males ($F = 9.53, p = .002$). Women averaged one arrest for violent Index crimes (men totaled four arrests) and nearly 10 arrests for property Index crimes (men totaled 14 arrests). These are significant gender differences, respectively ($F = 21.34, p = .000$) and ($F = 4.12, p = .043$). The 55 chronic female offenders in this census averaged four felony convictions ($F = 5.44, p = .020$) and two separate commitments to state or federal prison ($F = 6.69, p = .010$), whereas male offenders received nearly six felony convictions and nearly four separate prison commitments.

Numerous prior researchers have found that women are underrepresented in official and self-reported measures of Index offending (Ageton, 1983; Canter, 1982; Decker et al., 1993; Hindelang, 1979; Jensen & Eve, 1976; Phillips & DeFleur, 1982; Visher, 1983). The current findings note the importance of exploring the variation for gender differences within Index offenses. For both women and men ($F = 0.77, p = .382$), a murder arrest was quite rare. Only 7.3% of female recidivists and 9.7% of male offenders were ever arrested for murder. No female habitual offender netted an arrest for either rape or kidnapping. Although the prevalence of these crimes was also rare for males (less than one arrest for each offense), significant statistical differences did exist ($F = 3.32, p = .069$ for rape and $F = 3.79, p = .052$ for kidnapping). The largest differentials for violent Index offending occurred for the crimes of robbery and aggravated assault. The female habitual offenders averaged 0.18 arrests for robbery and 0.82 arrests for aggravated assault. The respective male totals were 0.89 ($F = 7.65, p = .006$) and 2.37 ($F = 17.16, p = .000$). These data indicate that with the exception

of aggravated assault, the average habitual offender, regardless of gender, does not total many arrests for the most violent crimes.

A somewhat different trend emerges for property Index offending. The most prevalent crime for both female and male recidivists was theft. Each averaged about 7.4 arrests for theft ($F = 0.00$, $p = .976$). Regardless of gender, chronic offenders were unlikely to be arrested for arson (0.04 and 0.09 average number of arrests respectively, $F = 0.87$, $p = .352$). Striking gender differences existed for the crimes of burglary ($F = 11.84$, $p = .001$) and motor vehicle theft ($F = 10.51$, $p = .001$). On average, women were arrested for burglary less than two times and for auto theft less than once. Conversely, males averaged over four arrests for burglary and nearly two arrests for auto theft. MANOVA output for Index offending appears in Table 3.

Non-Index Offending

For the less serious criminal offenses, the effect of gender was variable. Female recidivists totaled significantly more arrests than their male counterparts for prostitution ($F = 20.49$, $p = .000$), forgery ($F = 33.08$, $p = .000$), and fraud ($F = 17.90$, $p = .000$). These findings are supportive of prior research (Daly, 1994; Gilfus, 1992; Steffensmeier, 1993; Warren & Rosenbaum, 1987). Curiously, although forgery, fraud, and prostitution are generally means toward securing drugs, no significant gender differences existed among habitual offenders for drug offenses. Women were nominally more likely to be arrested for drug use or possession ($F = 0.05$, $p = .818$), whereas men were slightly more likely to net arrests for drug sales or trafficking ($F = 1.17$, $p = .281$). The following offender profile demonstrates the criminal career of a woman ensnared in the crime-drugs nexus:

White female was first arrested at age 22 (current age 34). Over a 12 year offending career, she totaled 81 arrest charges: 70 for prostitution, nine for drug use/possession, one for auto theft, and one for simple assault. She totaled zero felony convictions and prison sentences. Her only incarceration experience occurred at the county jail level.

Women were significantly underrepresented for weapons offenses ($F = 11.02$, $p = .001$), disorderly conduct ($F = 13.44$, $p = .000$), and vagrancy ($F = 7.29$, $p = .007$). On average, female recidivists netted five times fewer weapons arrests, nine times fewer vagrancy arrests, and two times fewer disorderly conduct arrests than their male contemporaries. The latter two offense types are criminal justice indicators of transience, a social status that is more common among males (see DeLisi, 2000b).

Eight additional offenses were committed relatively equally by female and male habitual offenders. Four of these offenses had a relatively low prevalence in that offenders accrued less than one arrest per offense type. As indicated in Table 4, the low prevalence crimes are sexual offenses ($F = 2.39$, $p = .123$), possession of stolen property ($F = 2.49$, $p = .115$), escape from a correctional facility or other criminal justice system supervision ($F = 0.02$, $p = .899$), and embezzlement ($F = 0.66$, $p = .415$). The remaining four offenses are high prevalence crimes. All habitual offenders were arrested for failure to appear ($F = 0.70$, $p = .405$), failure to comply ($F = 2.30$, $p = .130$), domestic violence ($F = 0.00$, $p = .961$), and DUI ($F = 0.60$, $p = .440$) with greater regularity. The following female offender demonstrates this active, generalized offending:

African American female was first arrested at age 20 (current age 49). Over a 29-year span, she totaled 57 arrest charges. These included 10 for aggravated assault, one for arson, 17 for simple assault, four for theft, one for fraud, 18 for disorderly conduct, two for vagrancy, three for failing to appear in court, and one for violation of probation. She also was convicted of four felonies and sentenced to four separate prison sentences.

To summarize, female and male habitual criminals accumulated arrests for a variety of offenses, a finding consistent with prior research (Danner et al., 1995; Tracy & Kempf-Leonard, 1996; Warren & Rosenbaum, 1987; Weiner, 1989). However, these women were not simply the isomorphic sisters of male habitual criminals. Contrary to prior studies (English, 1993; Hindelang, 1979; Steffensmeier, 1980), no significant gender differences existed in compiling arrests for "male" crimes such as murder, domestic violence, embezzlement, DUI, sale of drugs, sexual offenses (e.g., indecent exposure), receiving stolen property, escape, failure to appear, and violating correctional sentences. Females totaled significantly more arrests than males for forgery, fraud, and prostitution, findings that match national data (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999). Consistent with prior research (Brownstein et al., 1994; Fortune, Vega, & Silverman, 1980; Laub & McDermott, 1985), males totaled significantly more arrests than females for rape, robbery, aggravated assault, kidnapping, burglary, auto theft, weapons offenses, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy. The criminal careers of female recidivists were characterized by late onset spanning nearly 17 years and featuring arrests in one state. Official records included numerous aliases and other indicators used to deceive criminal justice personnel. MANOVA coefficients for non-Index offenses appear in Table 4.

DISCUSSION

This study provides preliminary answers to the questions posed earlier. Female habitual criminals *do* exist. These offenders are statistical outliers with official criminal records that dwarf the official records of recidivists in the extant literature (e.g., Wolfgang and colleagues' demarcation of just five arrests as qualification for chronic status). Unlike most criminological studies that limit their focus to White and Black offenders, female career offenders in this study were found among multiple racial and ethnic groups. The official careers of these women were initiated relatively late in life and continued for nearly two decades throughout middle adulthood. The criminal justice system had not accorded these women any semblance of chivalry based on the multitude of felony convictions, prison commitments, and arrests for failing to comply with a judiciary sentence.

The criminological profile of the career criminal is male-based for the very obvious reason that habitual criminality is much more prevalent among men than women. Over the five-year period of data collection, only 55 female criminals (11% of the total) netted enough arrests to qualify for habitual offender status. Thus, the lack of scholarly research investigating gender and career criminality is in large part a function of inaccessibility. Career criminals are very elusive and rarely appear in criminological research (Cernkovich, Giordano, & Pugh, 1985). Indeed, the most extreme offenders in the current study comprised just 2% of all arrestees! Although the current analyses are a helpful exploration of women and habitual criminality, it is important to recognize that the prevalence of habitual criminality among males is nearly an order of magnitude greater than the prevalence among females. Also, these data were sampled from one region of the United States and may not be representative of chronic offenders elsewhere. These points should be considered when interpreting these findings.

Gender matters to the study of criminal careers. Women most commonly begin official involvement in crime during early adulthood; however, a substantial number of women are not first arrested until middle adulthood. Once initiated, women's criminal careers are discursive and involve an array of property, public-order, and, to a lesser degree, violent crimes. The foundation of female offending careers appears to be drugs, evidenced by multiple arrests for behaviors based on the rapid obtainment of money: theft, forgery, fraud, and prostitution. Thus, whereas male career criminals denote a rather substantial societal cost (e.g., consistent involvement in dire criminal violence), female career criminals are less threatening to the community. Moreover, their drug-addled criminality exacerbates their adverse involvement in the criminal justice system. Women averaged over seven missed court dates and three violations of sentences (e.g., probation). The potentially eventual outcome of consistent non-compliance with

the criminal justice system is prison, a sanction with which these women had considerable experience. This profile is quite comparable to Daly's (1998, p. 93) "leading feminist scenario" of women's pathways to crime: Women may have run from abusive households to the street, or they may have been attracted to the "fast money" of a deviant lifestyle. Once on the street, young women engage in petty hustles or prostitution. Life on the street may lead to drug use and addiction, which may lead to more frequent lawbreaking to support a drug habit.

Regrettably, these data did not contain more contextual information regarding the life circumstances, family, peer, and romantic relationships, education, and employment of both female and male offenders. Scholars investigating the gendered elements of criminal behavior (e.g., Belknap, 1996; Daly, 1998) have found that relationships and economic circumstances (e.g., Daly [1998, p. 101] describes this as the "gendered social order") can increase involvement in crime. Future research could investigate how relationships, social institution, and, more explicitly, a gendered understanding of these concepts translate into criminal behavior.

Concomitantly, female habitual criminals pose a theoretical challenge. In the parlance of criminal career research, many female habitual offenders in the current study were "late starters," meaning their onset age of arrest occurred in adulthood. However, a sizable literature (Blumstein et al., 1986; Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995; Tracy & Kempf-Leonard, 1996) suggests that persons who are "early starters" or experience onset during childhood or early adolescence are the most longitudinally chronic offenders.⁶ Thus, female career criminals do not appear to fit theoretical trajectories of offending. Moffitt (2001) suggests that "persistent, stable antisocial behavior is found among a relatively small number of males whose behavior problems are quite extreme" (2001, p. 92). Moreover, Moffitt suggests that these antisocial behaviors are a sign of psychopathology, an abnormal phenomenon found among 5% of males (2001, p. 112). Psychopathology occurring among females is not mentioned. Is Moffitt's developmental taxonomy (and criminal career theories generally) only salient for males? The current findings are modest evidence that the answer is negative. More empirical evidence of female chronic offenders is needed, and researchers need to include women in their samples. Finally, future research and theory would be helpful in explaining why the women in this study engaged in such prolific criminal careers during their adult lives.

NOTES

1. This literature is limited to research framed in the contemporary criminal career paradigm. For all intents and purposes, this research framework began in 1986 with the publication of the "Criminal Careers/Career Criminals" report under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences.

2. Two recent studies further examined gender differences in desistance; however, neither contained particularly recidivistic female offenders. Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) sampled ex-offenders and ex-addicts and reported that females were arrested at much lower levels than males. However, they provided no descriptive data regarding the severity or chronicity of female criminal careers. Pezzin's (1995) study used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Respondents from this survey averaged only 2-3 arrests, rendering the study unhelpful for analysis of serious offending.

3. For more exhaustive discussion of gender-related criminological theory, readers should reference (Belknap, 1996; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Daly, 1998; Heidensohn, 1997).

4. Arrest charges were summarized for murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, kidnapping, burglary, theft, auto theft, arson, simple assault, domestic violence and offenses against family, driving while intoxicated, forgery, fraud, embezzlement, receiving stolen property, vandalism/damage to property, weapons offenses, prostitution and commercialized vice, sexual offenses such as indecent exposure, possession/use of drugs, sale/trafficking of drugs, disorderly conduct, vagrancy, escape, failure to appear in court, failure to comply with probation/parole, felony convictions, and prison sentences.

5. Preliminary data analysis using negative binomial regression models regressed total arrests, violent Index arrests, property Index arrests, felony convictions, and prison sentences on age, race, and onset for male and female chronic offenders. Chi-square statistics indicated that the models were not appropriate estimates for the female sample, probably due to small sample size. For the female offenders, these statistics were: total arrests ($\chi^2 = 1.31, p = .735$), violent Index arrests ($\chi^2 = 4.75, p = .192$), property Index arrests ($\chi^2 = 6.25, p = .119$), and felony convictions ($\chi^2 = 5.12, p = .162$). The model predicted prison sentences was significantly reliable ($\chi^2 = 7.87, p = .053$). The corresponding coefficients for males (all significant at the $p = .000$ level) were $\chi^2 = 35.1, \chi^2 = 39.7, \chi^2 = 45.6, \chi^2 = 69.8, \chi^2 = 69.1$.

6. Gerald Patterson developed the early starter-late starter concepts. Moffitt's developmental taxonomy with adolescence-limited and life-course persistent offenders are homologous to Patterson's. Moffitt (2001) effectively summarizes the literature on habitual criminal conduct.

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