



Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice

Assignment One:
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Question One:

The actions or conduct of various harmful, disruptive, and threatening violations of the law are known as criminal behaviour. Walden University (2025) explains that criminal behaviours include a multitude of activities, either minor or serious, including that of violent crimes, public order crimes, property offences or white-collar crimes. The focus of this discussion is to critically evaluate the extent to which gender serves as an accurate indicator of criminal behaviour, beginning with an outline of the main discussion followed by evidence and analysis to support the argument that gender may or may not be the most accurate indicator of criminal behaviour. There are many psychological theories that consider gender a large part of criminal activity, among them are the sex role theory, the opportunity theory, the marginalisation theory, and several feminist criminological theories, (Thornberry, 2018). Along with theories, there are also studies and statistics that demonstrate the relevance of gender in the partaking of criminal activities, for example, Haynie's longitudinal study of 1998, Daly's Pathways Theory of 1992 and Crime Survey for England and Wales, (Wilcox and Gonzales, 2024). Each of these studies have contributed significant findings to the understanding of criminal behaviour and the links to gender, highlighting a complex interconnection between social, environmental, psychological, and biological factors in the shaping of criminal conduct across genders. Gender is allegedly a significant factor in criminal behaviour and research from Bennet, Farrington and Huesmann (2005) show that males commit a significantly higher rate of criminal activity, however this research is now outdated, but even so, Boyle (2024) considers this to be relevant and statistics do show that there are far more males in prison than female.

Research into criminal behaviour and the links to gender has a long history. Before the 1900s, not a large amount of research was done to thoroughly explore the relationship between gender and crime, relatively few studies were conducted, but because of their stereotypical portrayals on the behaviour of women and not nearly enough substantial evidence, these studies were full of inaccuracies and limitations, (Heijden and Pluskota, (2018). Court records from the Old Bailey in London and theories produced by Cesare Lombroso were thought to be significant pre 1900s, however, lack considerable evidence. The key problem with the research, theories and records is that the analysis does not take into account that a large amount of petty crime between the 17th - 19th century was committed by women, Heijden (2020) states that there are evident signs that at least 20 to 50 percent of crimes such as burglary or theft were committed by women. Back then, the focus surrounded male criminality, and some scholars addressing crime did not consider female criminality to be interesting enough and solely studies male criminality. One criticism of the already existing literature is the lack of gender analysis, Estrada (2019) expresses those studies conducted before the twentieth century typically left out women's criminality and the issue of gender differences in crime because the scholars felt they were "less important". Additionally, there also seemed to be a lack of comparative studies of crime and gender in general. Women were largely invisible within criminological research, in fact modern feminist criminology did not emerge until the 1960s and 1970s where the roles of women were coincidentally beginning to change, (Gelsthorpe, 2020). Renzetti (2018) and Clay-Warner and Edgemon (2020) suggest that it emerged in response to the male dominated field of criminology where women were overlooked because of the social expectations that portray women to be gentle and nurturing in comparison to men who can be unsympathetic and show aggression. Criminological theories illustrate the many factors that can

influence criminal behaviour, for instance, environmental, psychological and biological factors. The National Business for Crime Center (2025) demonstrate that the social context of how an individual lives has an influence on criminality, along with substance abuse, addictions, mental health issues, and neurobiology. Each of these factors can contribute massively toward the actions of a person and have an impact on brain function and impulses. Boyle (2024) articulate that the expectations and gender norms indicate that men are primary aggressors and women are taught to be more concerned about public appearance and therefore are encouraged to conform and cooperate to roles set out for them by society. The issue with this is society expects women to stay out of trouble and in instances where this does not happen, the justice system tends to be harsh and judgemental. Armstrong (2022) and Mazlan et al., (2020) mention that several studies suggest there are clear links between high levels of testosterone and aggression, which would lead to criminal behaviour, this also could be a factor that contributes to gender differences in crime. However, Durrant (2019) criticises this by arguing that the evidence of testosterone and crime levels are weak, particularly in men. Although, research has contributed to this theory showing that prisoners that have committed violent crimes in particular tended to have higher levels of testosterone in comparison to those that committed less serious offences Estrada-Renolds et al., (2016). Despite this the study conducted by James Dabbs in 1995 found that there was a correlation between high testosterone and violence, the study is a good indicator of relevance as the subjects were prisoners with high levels of drug and alcohol abuse as well as delinquency, and the study was conducted around both male and female,(Armstrong et al., 2022). However, the lack of research on this theory in the last 30 years does bring limitations to Dabbs' theory. Research suggests that the types of criminal behaviour committed vary in seriousness by gender. For example, statistics from the Ministry of

Justice (2022) report that women are more likely to engage in fraud or property crime rather than acts of violence, whereas men tend to commit more serious violent or sexual crimes. This links back to the socialisation factors, and criminological theories like the sex role theory offer an explanation as traditional feminine norms are less conducive to criminality; female socialisation puts emphasis on the caring and nurturing nature of women, reducing their likelihood of harming others, (Belknap, 2020). In addition to this, Jones (2019) expresses that the traditional roles of women, for example childcare, increase an attachment to family and community relations, decreasing the likelihood of violence and crime, the author also suggests that higher crime rates in males link to traditional masculine identity. Although, Cortoni and Stefanov (2020) disagree, stating that the roles of women have no impact on the level of criminality and that some women actually commit crimes, like theft or fraud, to try and benefit their family/children. There are several feminist criminology theories that offer explanation as to why women commit crime, the first being Liberal Feminism, that focuses on equality often arguing that women's crime is on the increase. Naffine (2018) says that the increased participation reflects the ever evolving social or economic roles of women, again, suggesting that crime is used to provide for their families. A limitation of this theory is that many women are the sole carers of their children and would take caution in the participation of criminal behaviour because the risk of getting caught is bigger than the reward, a woman sentenced to prison would have children taken out of her custody and many women would be put off by this, (Criminal Justice Inspectorates, 2021). Similarly, Radical Feminism also places the blame for women's involvement in crime onto society as they view the patriarchy as the root cause of female crime and victimisation, (Gelsthorpe, 2020). Gelsthorpe (2020) argues that the male dominated social structure is oppressive to women and this fosters environments where women are

victimised and marginalised, criminal behaviour is used as a form of survival or resistance – this emphasises a systemic nature of gender inequality. Carrington (2018) highlights how societal power dynamics contribute to the victimisation and contribution to crime by saying that many of the domestic issues are produced by criminal justice agencies and their harsh treatment towards females in the system. Another feminist criminological theory is Marxist Feminism that examines the intersection of gender and class in criminal behaviour. Renzetti (2018) points out that marginalisation often comes from areas of a lower class, where crime rate can be higher. Marxism forces the blame onto capitalism, suggesting that it may be the root of female criminality, similarly to radical feminism. This perspective delves into domestic violence and assumes that as it is rooted within both gender and class dynamics, that victims, given the opportunity, retaliate with their own violence or steal what they need to better their situation, (Belknap, 2020). The last feminist theory is Postmodern Feminism, a much different theory than the others as it regards gender fluid identities. This refers to gender experiences that change overtime, including a mix of female or male or other genders rather than just the one a person is born with, (Gosling, 2018). Rosenbury (2019) observes that postmodern feminism critiques the essentialist views of women as victims and declares that they are also capable of committing violent acts such as men are. However, Rosenbury's interpretation overlooks much of the historical research that suggests that women were not the ones committing violent crime, but property crimes like fraud instead, although the lack of female crime studies could play a large part in this. Evolutionary perspectives also consider men to be more likely in engaging in criminal behaviour, Boothroyd (2016) says that the approach argues that male aggression along with their risk-taking behaviours are part of a survival instinct that has adapted over the years for "reproductive success". The key problem with this theory is that it

oversimplifies the complex nature of human behaviours by initially attributing it to evolutionary adaptations, furthermore it fails to consider the significance of cultural, environmental and social factors in the shaping of human behaviour. Moreover, Connell (2021) suggests further challenges of biological theories, emphasising that not all males exhibit high levels of aggression, and that the theory makes no attempt to give sufficient consideration to the variability in the behaviour of men, with many males adopting less aggressive tendencies. Consequently, the theory severely underestimates the role of choice in the behaviours of women, recent statistics from the Ministry of Justice (2022) stating that men and women are both just as likely to commit crime, but underreporting of women's crimes are more than likely the reason that 14% of female defendants were prosecuted for the same indictable offences as males, who took the lead by 23% of prosecutions. The offending patterns between men and women do differ considerably as Pheonix (2025) elaborate that around 85% of crimes processed within modern criminal justice systems are committed by male offenders. The Ministry of Justice (2022) agrees with this as they clarify that in the year of 2021, of all the individuals dealt with by the criminal justice system (CJS) in the UK, only 21 percent were identified as female. The Criminal Justice Inspectorates (2021) and the Ministry of Justice (2025) indicate that although women do come into the CJS, they are typically dealt with for far less serious offences, and often they are not prosecuted. Gender is said to significantly impact the criminal justice system, which is often demonstrated in various aspects from arrest rates, sentencing and incarceration, (Perussich, 2021 and HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). In addition, Prison Reform Trust (2021) argue that women are disproportionately affected within our CJS as they often face incarceration for minor offences, the National Police Chiefs Council (2022) hold the same standpoint as they put forward that women of colour are twice as likely to be arrested and prosecuted

for minor crimes than their white counterpart. It is true that ethnic minority groups account for higher proportions of prosecutions, but records do indicate that there are far less females from these minority groups incarcerated than males, (Ministry of Justice, 2022). Regardless of this, such explanations tend to overlook the fact that both Prison Reform Trust (2022) and the UK Parliament (2022) illustrate that women only make up 4% of the overall prison population, with males being twice as likely (34%) more likely to be sent right to jail for their crimes. Moreover, women often receive shorter sentences with the average custodial sentence of 14.5 years, whereas the average for men being 22.7 years. While the criminal justice system's treatment of gender differences in criminal behaviour highlights the obvious disparities in prosecution and sentencing, sociological theories of crime provide insights and explanations for these differences by further examining how strain theory and social learning theory shape criminal conduct. Primarily developed by Albert Bandura, the social learning theory holds explanations for how observation contributes to new behaviours, attitudes and values, (Rotter, 2021). The theory begins with a simple observation, Bandura formed the hypothesis that everyone learns through the observation of behaviour exhibited around them, often taking in the consequences but not fully apprehending them, the theory also put forward that during Bandura's study, males were far quicker at imitating the violent behaviour, but females also showed imitation. (Alkers and Jennings, 2019). After the observation comes modelling and vicarious reinforcement, meaning that individuals start to imitate behaviours and perceive the rewards or punishments, this theory unlike behaviourism, puts emphasis on the role of mental processes in learning, (Rotter, 2021). Bandura's theory suggests that criminal behaviours are learned through observation and imitation, which accentuates the importance of social context in the sculpting of criminal activity, (Bandura, 2024). Another considerable theory is

Merton's Classic Strain Theory that proclaims that crime occurs when there is a gap between societal goals, for example financial success, and the means to achieve the goals. His theory suggests that when an individual cannot attain social accepted goals legally, they turn to criminal behaviour in desperation, (Robert, 2018). A further theory was then born from Merton's by a man called Robert Agnew, who expanded the theory, providing that males and females experience different strains. Agnew and Brezina (2019) put forth that although women react more emotionally, men are somewhat more likely to respond with anger, leading to serious violent crimes, whereas women are more likely to use rationalisation. Despite this, Agnew and Brezina (2019) explain that under serious strain paired with victimisation and oppression, the actions of females can contribute to criminal behaviour, this application of the strain theory therefore suggests that women only react to strain irrationally under specific circumstances. Each of these theories offer distinct but complementary explanations for the relationship of criminal behaviour and gender and together they insinuate that males are likely to experience strains that are conducive to serious crime and imitate criminal behaviours. Costello and Laub (2020) point out that there although both theories offer explanation for the relationship between gender and crime, they contain weaknesses, the biggest being that they neglect gender inequality. Both theories fail to explain how inequalities in gender contribute to various types of strain and the different coping mechanisms held by men and women, moreover, the strain theory holds assumption that individuals under strain will turn to crime inevitably, not taking into consideration that there are coping mechanisms that are non-criminal. Despite their limitations the theories provide valuable insights into gender differences in crime, but the research would be more valuable if it had examined specific cases of violent female offenders to offer a concrete illustration of how theory can be applied to real-life scenarios

and further challenge traditional gender expectations in crime. The case of Amelia Dyer, a notorious violent offender explores how her criminal activity challenged traditional gender norms and aligned or deviated from different criminological theories such as the rational choice theory, routine activity theory and the social disorganisation theory, (April, 2020). Dyer who was nicknamed “The Reading Baby Farmer” defied societal norms for women in Victorian England, which sharply contrasted with the expected caring and empathetic nature of females, April (2020) makes it clear that she exploited unmarried, vulnerable women who were already facing stigma by offering them a “respectable solution” to their grave circumstances. She, a trained midwife and nurse, twisted the nurturing roles associated with her gender into tools for murder, and her criminal enterprise granted her financial independence during a time where women had little or no opportunity economically. Furthermore, Williams and Godfrey (2018) describe how she manipulated not only unmarried mothers, but society, and took advantage of the trust she was given as a caregiver to carry out her crimes. Her criminal behaviour went on for years, and she evaded all suspicion, disputing the belief that women could not engage in criminality so calculated and ill – framed, the sheer scale of her crimes defied all contemporary expectations of the capacity for women's criminal involvement, (Crime Museum, 2025). Thames Valley Police (2025) put forth that Dyers was responsible for the murders of hundreds of babies; she hanged in 1896 after the murder of an estimated 200 to 400 infants. Her crimes forced society to confront the uncomfortable reality, that women could kill, and while her actions were undoubtedly atrocious, her case brought to light that many societal issues such as the lack of support for single mothers along with the unregulated nature of adoption in Victorian England could no longer be ignored, (Thames Valley Police, 2025). Seemingly Dyers motivations for criminality were centred around financial gain, the combination of financial motivation

and her ability to evade detection fuelled her heinous actions. Whilst financial gain is a large motivator behind criminal behaviour, it is not the only one, the case of Peter Sutcliffe, or the Yorkshire Ripper, is evidence of this. Sutcliffe, who was found guilty of murdering thirteen women and the attempted murder of a further seven, worked quickly and lethally between 1975-80, (Matthews and Clark, 2024). His victims, all women, aged between 16 and 47, were attacked late at night with a hammer striking their heads, followed by a sharp screwdriver used to stab and mutilate their bodies, Jones (2023) explains that they were all presumably sex workers, until proven untrue. The motivations behind Sutcliffe's crimes were as disturbing as the killings, as he claimed that God had asked him to rid the world of prostitutes, he stated that his victims were "filth" and he was simply "cleaning up the streets", (Wattis, 2018). Although, it is crucial to say that not all his victims were involved with sex work or prostitution; his assaults on women who were not included students and other respectable women. The motivations between the two crimes are entirely different and illustrate how either gender can be capable of murder, despite criminological theories suggesting otherwise. There are many indicators of criminal behaviour that exclude gender completely, for instance early behavioural problems, social isolate, substance abuse and mental ill health. Early behavioural problems can be an indicator of crime as they tend to have some involvement with aggressive or anti-social behaviour, levels of aggression within young children can signal further aggression later in life that develops into a larger problem, (Kalvin and Bierman, 2018). Likewise, a pattern of substance abuse or mental ill health often correlates with criminal activity, however when circumstantial, diminished responsibility can be taken into consideration. When left untreated, mental health issues can impair judgement and/or increase impulsivity of individuals, increasing the likelihood of engaging in illegal activities, (Nicholson, 2017). Kings College London (2025)

indicate that there's a chance that individuals suffering from mental ill health are seven times more probable to have some involvement in illegal activities. Other indicators such as previous involvement in crime, lack of empathy and family/social background can also be indicators of criminal involvement. However, when considering each of these factors as indicators of criminal behaviour paired with gender, some patterns emerge. Like, men having a larger connection to impulsiveness and aggression, McCarthy, Chaplin and Forester (2019) foster the attitude that since these traits are linked to crime, then males are the perpetrators. In contrast to this, the authors consider females to be more at risk for emotional distress, which of course can lead to criminal activity, but manifests differently. This attitude is problematic as each gender can be impulsive or emotionally distressed, and it does not take into consideration those who are not cis-gender and who may feel emotions or strains differently to the gender they identify as because of their biological nature. Additionally, norms related to gender can influence how aggression is perceived or expressed, such as with those who are not cis-gender, (Britton, Jacobsen and Howard, 2017).

It has been established that males might be more likely to engage in forms of physical violence and aggression, while females may resort to non-violent crimes like theft or fraud and as many theorists argue, social or economic pressures are to blame. But to understand whether gender is the most accurate indicator of criminal behaviour each of the other indicators must be assessed in association. Gender, although a principal factor, historically has not been the most comprehensive indicator of criminal behaviour and therefore cannot be definitive. Well known theories like the strain theory and the social learning theory provide valuable insights into gender differences in criminality, but their scope is limited as they fail to fully comprehend and account for the complexities of cultural and social influences and

structural inequalities, (Isom Scott and Mikell, 2018). Moreover, the lack of research conducted on female criminality leads to the downfall of substantial empirical evidence to support the theories. Each theory of crime has their own limitations in offering explanations for the relationship of gender and crime, but by examining cases of violent female offenders, this could be resolved. Also, after further analysis of female violence, like the Amelia Dyer case, it becomes evident that crime cannot be reduced to a single factor such as gender but instead criminality must be understood through a multifaceted lens that considers environmental, biological, social, and psychological influences. In conclusion, the criminal justice system must move to a more nuanced approach, one that moves beyond simplistic categories and acknowledges the diverse and intersecting factors that contribute to criminal behaviour.

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