Gender Considerations in Violence

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KEYWORDS

- Violence • Gender • Women • Intimate partner violence • Risk assessment
- Female stalkers • Gender bias

KEY POINTS

- Women account for a minority of the incarcerated population. However, the rate of incarceration in women is increasing.
- Women are much less likely to be convicted of a violence offense compared with men.
- Both women and men share the following risk factors for violence: younger age, a history of childhood conduct problems, substance use, and legal history.
- The gender disparity in violence decreases in the setting of mental illness.
- Some differences in female sex offenders are higher rates of abuse compared with men, increased likelihood of victimizing biological children, and greater likelihood of engaging in a sexual offense with a codefendant.
- Women who kill their children most often do so in the context of chronic abuse or neglect.
- Like men, women may be violent in intimate partner relationships and they have various reasons and motives.

INTRODUCTION

Although women account for only 7% of the incarcerated population, the number is growing.[1] Men are more likely to commit acts of violence. However, this may not be true in all settings. Studies have indicated that the gender difference in violence decreases in the setting of mental illness.[2] Understanding the gender differences and similarities in violent behaviors helps to establish accurate risk assessment and treatment. The application of gender-informed risk assessments might be instrumental in reducing the risk of future violent behaviors. The role of gender in risk assessment,

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sexual offending, intimate partner violence, and child murder is explored in this article.

RISK ASSESSMENT IN WOMEN

Violence risk instruments assign a classification for the likelihood that an individual will commit violence (low, moderate, or high risk). Many of these instruments were primarily normed on male prison populations,[3] which has led to debate in the literature about whether certain static factors among men (eg, the sex of the victim) accurately predict the likelihood of female-perpetrated violence or reoffense.[3–5] However, some research suggests that certain risk factors found among men apply to women as well.[3,4,6,7] For example, violence is more likely to be committed by younger individuals whether male or female.[3,4,6,7] Similarly, a history of conduct problems as a child, substance use, and legal history are all risk factors that apply to both men and women.[3,4,6,7] In addition, there may be specific risk factors for women that assessment instruments do not measure, such as being a victim of intimate partner violence (Box 1). For example, an epidemiologic study done about British women in the community found the following to be the strongest factors for predicting future violence among women: young age, residence in social-assisted housing, history of early conduct problems, being a victim of intimate partner violence, having a history of self-harm behaviors, excessive drinking, and past criminal justice involvement.[4]

An additional confounding variable for violence risk assessment is mental health history. For example, incarcerated populations often have co-occurring diagnoses such as personality disorders, PTSD, and substance use disorders. When developing assessment instruments, co-occurring diagnoses may cause skewed results compared with the results produced by a general population sample or a sample showing a single disease state such as depression.[8] For example, in a recent large Swedish study, Fazel and colleagues[9] sought to determine the risk of violent crimes among patients with a recent outpatient diagnosis of depression. As part of the study, the investigators considered an outpatient population diagnosed with depression compared with age-matched controls. The investigators did a secondary analysis involving siblings to try to factor out environmental influences, personality disorders,

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Box 1
Domains of risk factors for violence-prone women

Childhood adversity: foster care, runaway, unstable family structure

Conduct problems: school expulsions, juvenile offenses

Living situation: unstable housing, subsidized housing, homelessness

Relationships: dysfunctional, unstable, unmarried

Past victimization: sexual abuse, victim of intimate partner violence

Lifestyle: lifestyle that leads to frequent interactions with police or authorities

Adult trauma: victim of crime, traumatic separation

Mental health history: depression, anxiety, psychosis, self-harm attempt, personality disorders

Substance abuse

Data from Yang M, Wong SC, Coid JW. Violence, mental health and violence risk factors among community women: an epidemiological study based on two national household surveys in the UK. BMC Public Health 2013;12:1020.