Gender and Delinquency

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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Cognitive Differences
Personality Differences
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What Does This Mean to Me? Sexual Harassment

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Gender Patterns in Delinquency
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Support for Liberal Feminism
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CRITICAL FEMINIST VIEWS
Crime and Patriarchy
Power-Control Theory

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should:

1. Be familiar with the changes in the female delinquency rate.
2. Understand the cognitive differences between males and females.
3. Be able to discuss the differences in socialization between boys and girls and how this may affect their behavior.
4. Understand the psychological differences between the sexes.
5. Be able to discuss the early work on gender, delinquency, and human traits.
6. Know the elements contemporary trait theorists view as the key to understanding gender differences, such as psychological makeup and hormonal differences.
7. Know how socialization is thought to affect delinquency rates.
8. Discuss the views of contemporary socialization theorists.
9. Know to what the term liberal feminism refers.
10. Discuss how critical feminists view female delinquency and describe Hagan’s power-control theory.
11. Be familiar with how the treatment girls receive by the juvenile justice system differs from the treatment of boys.
On May 4, 2003, girls at a “powder-puff” touch football game in Northbrook, Illinois, went on a rampage that was captured on videotape. Senior girls began the event by chugging beer straight from a keg provided by some parents. Then they began pounding some of the younger girls with their fists and with bats, while pushing them down into the mud. They doused the novice football players with excrement, garbage, and food. The students apparently arranged the event in secret, making sure that school administrators were kept unaware of the time and place. In the aftermath, five girls were hospitalized, including one who broke an ankle and another who suffered a cut that required ten stitches in her head; the attackers were suspended from school and criminal charges filed.

The Northbrook incident was shocking because it involved young girls in an extremely violent incident, an image that defies the traditional image of females as less aggressive than males. This vision is not new.

To early delinquency experts, the female offender was an aberration who engaged in crimes that usually had a sexual connotation—prostitution, running away (which presumably leads to sexual misadventure), premarital sex, and crimes of sexual passion (killing a boyfriend or a husband).1 Criminologists often ignored female offenders, assuming that they rarely violated the law, or if they did, that their illegal acts were status-type offenses. Female delinquency was viewed as emotional or family-related, and such problems were not an important concern of criminologists. In fact, the few “true” female delinquents were considered anomalies whose criminal activity was a function of taking on masculine characteristics, a concept referred to as the masculinity hypothesis.2

Contemporary interest in the association between gender and delinquency has surged, fueled by observations that although the female delinquency rate is still much lower than the male rate, it is growing at a faster pace than male delinquency. Moreover, the types of delinquent acts that young women are engaging in seem quite similar to those of young men. Larceny and aggravated assault, the crimes for which most young men are arrested, are also the most common offenses for which females are arrested. There is evidence that girls are getting more heavily involved in gangs and gang violence.3 Although girls still commit less crime than boys, members of both sexes are similar in the onset and development of their offending careers.4 In societies with high rates of male delinquency, there are also high rates of female delinquency. Over time, male and female arrest rates rise and fall in a parallel fashion.5

Another reason for the interest in gender studies is that conceptions of gender differences have changed. A feminist approach to understanding crime is now firmly established. The stereotype of the female delinquent as a sexual deviant is no longer taken seriously.6 The result has been an increased effort to conduct research that would adequately explain differences and similarities in male and female offending patterns.

This chapter provides an overview of gender factors in delinquency. We first discuss some of the gender differences in development and how they may relate to the gender differences in offending rates. Then we turn to some explanations for
these differences: (1) the trait view, (2) the socialization view, (3) the liberal feminist view, and (4) the critical feminist view.

**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DEVELOPMENT**

Gender differences in cognition, socialization, and behavior may exist as early as infancy, when boys are able to express emotions at higher rates. Infant girls show greater control over their emotions, whereas boys are more easily angered and depend more on inputs from their mothers. There are indications that gender differences in socialization and development do exist and that they may have an effect on juvenile offending patterns.

**Socialization Differences**

Psychologists believe that differences in the way females and males are socialized affect their development. Males learn to value independence, whereas females are taught that their self-worth depends on their ability to sustain relationships. Girls, therefore, run the risk of losing themselves in their relationships with others, while boys may experience a chronic sense of alienation. Because so many relationships go sour, females also run the risk of feeling alienated because of the failure to achieve relational success.

Although there are few gender differences in aggression during the first few years of life, girls are socialized to be less aggressive than boys and are supervised more closely. Differences in aggression become noticeable between ages three and six, when children are socialized into organized groups, such as the daycare center. Males are more likely to display physical aggression, whereas females display relational aggression—for example, by excluding disliked peers from play groups.

As they mature, girls learn to respond to provocation by feeling anxious, unlike boys, who are encouraged to retaliate. Overall, women are much more likely to feel distressed than men. Although females get angry as often as males, many have been taught to blame themselves for such feelings. Females are, therefore, much more likely than males to respond to anger with feelings of depression, anxiety, and shame. Females are socialized to fear that anger will harm relationships; males are encouraged to react with “moral outrage,” blaming others for their discomfort.

Females are also more likely than males to be targets of sexual and physical abuse. Female victims have been shown to suffer more seriously from these attacks, sustaining damage to their self-image; victims of sexual abuse find it difficult to build autonomy and life skills.

**Cognitive Differences**

There are also cognitive differences between males and females starting in childhood. Males excel in tasks that assess the ability to manipulate visual
images in working memory, whereas females do better in tasks that require retrieval from long-term memory and the acquisition and use of verbal information. Girls learn to speak earlier and faster, and with better pronunciation, most likely because parents talk more to their infant daughters than to their infant sons. Girls are far less likely than boys to have reading problems, but boys do much better on standardized math tests, which is attributed by some experts to their strategies for approaching math problems. Boys in the United States are more likely than girls to be dyslexic.

In most cases cognitive differences are small, narrowing, and usually attributed to cultural expectations. When given training, girls can increase their visual-spatial skills. However, differences still exert a penalty on young girls. For example, performance on the mathematics portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) still favors males: twice as many boys as girls attain scores over 500 and thirteen times as many boys as girls attain scores over 700.

**Personality Differences**

Girls are often stereotyped as talkative, but research shows that in many situations boys spend more time talking than girls do. Females are more willing to reveal their feelings and more likely to express concern for others. Females are more concerned about finding the “meaning of life” and less interested in competing for material success. Males are more likely to introduce new topics and to interrupt conversations.

Adolescent females use different knowledge than males and have different ways of interpreting their interactions with others. These gender differences may have an impact on self-esteem and self-concept. Research shows that, as adolescents develop, male self-esteem and self-concept rise whereas female self-confidence is lowered. One reason is that girls are more likely to stress about their weight and be more dissatisfied with the size and shape of their bodies. Young girls are regularly confronted with unrealistically high standards of slimness that make them extremely unhappy with their own bodies; it is not surprising that the incidence of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia have increased markedly in recent years. Psychologist Carol Gilligan uncovered an alternative explanation for this decline in female self-esteem: as girls move into adolescence, they become aware of the conflict between the positive way they see themselves and the negative way society views females. Many girls respond by “losing their voices”—that is, submerging their own feelings and accepting the negative view of women conveyed by adult authorities.

These various gender differences are described in Concept Summary 6.1.

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**Concept Summary 6.1 Gender Differences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>Sustain relationships.</td>
<td>Be independent.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Be less aggressive.</td>
<td>Be aggressive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blame self.</td>
<td>Externalize anger.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Have superior verbal ability.</td>
<td>Have superior visual/spatial ability.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Speak earlier.</td>
<td>Are better at math.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Have better pronunciation.</td>
<td>Are materialistic.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Read better.</td>
<td>Have high self-esteem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Have lower self-esteem.</td>
<td>Have low attention span.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Are self-aware.</td>
<td>Are materialistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have better attention span.</td>
<td>Have low attention span.</td>
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</table>
What Does This Mean to Me?

Sexual Harassment

Can gender differences in perception shape the perception of sexual harassment? For example, research shows that males and females both generally agree that sexual coercion and sexual propositions constitute sexual harassment. Yet males do not think that sex-stereotyped jokes are a form of harassment while females do; females think that repeated requests for dates after a refusal constitute harassment while males think there is nothing wrong with asking girls out again and again. It is not surprising to discover that females perceive that sexual harassment has occurred in situations where males find no wrongdoing.

1. Do you think that these different perceptions are biologically related or a matter of socialization?
2. (For women): Have you ever been in a situation where you felt yourself being sexually harassed by a male who thought he was doing nothing wrong?
3. (For men): Have you ever been accused of sexual harassment by a woman you know even though you personally felt you did nothing wrong?

What Causes Gender Differences?

Why do these gender differences occur? Some experts suggest that gender differences may have a biological origin: males and females are essentially different. They have somewhat different brain organizations; females are more left-brain-oriented and males more right-brain-oriented. (The left brain is believed to control language; the right, spatial relations.) Others point to the hormonal differences between the sexes as the key to understanding their behavior.

Another view is that gender differences are a result of the interaction of socialization, learning, and enculturation. Boys and girls may behave differently because they have been exposed to different styles of socialization, learned different values, and had different cultural experiences. It follows, then, that if members of both sexes were equally exposed to the factors that produce delinquency, their delinquency rates would be equivalent. According to psychologist Sandra Bem’s gender-schema theory, our culture polarizes males and females by forcing them to obey mutually exclusive gender roles, or “scripts.” Girls are expected to be “feminine,” exhibiting traits such as being sympathetic and gentle. In contrast, boys are expected to be “masculine,” exhibiting assertiveness and dominance. Children internalize these scripts and accept gender polarization as normal. Children’s self-esteem becomes wrapped up in how closely their behavior conforms to the proper sex role stereotype. When children begin to perceive themselves as either boys or girls (which occurs at about age three), they search for information to help them define their role; they begin to learn what behavior is appropriate for their sex. Girls are expected to behave according to the appropriate script and to seek approval of their behavior. Are they acting as girls should at that age? Masculine behavior is to be avoided. In contrast, males look for cues from their peers to define their masculinity; aggressive behavior may be rewarded with peer approval, whereas sensitivity is viewed as nonmasculine.

See the accompanying What Does This Mean to Me feature for an interesting perspective on the issue of sexual harassment.

Gender Differences and Delinquency

Regardless of their origin, gender distinctions may partly explain the significant gender differences in the delinquency rate. Males seem more aggressive and less likely to form attachments to others, factors that might increase their crime rates. Males view aggression as an appropriate means to gain status. Boys are also more likely than girls to socialize with deviant peers, and when they do, they display personality traits that make them more susceptible to delinquency. Recent research by Jean Bottcher found that young boys perceive their roles as being more dominant than young girls. Male perceptions of power, their ability to have freedom and hang with their friends, helped explain the gender differences in delinquency.

Girls are shielded by their moral sense, which directs them to avoid harming others. Their moral sensitivity may counterbalance the effects of family problems. Females display more self-control than males, a factor that has been related to criminality.

Females are more verbally proficient, a skill that may help them deal with conflict without resorting to violence. They are taught to be less aggressive and view
belligerence as a lack of self-control. When girls are aggressive, they are more likely than boys to hide their behavior from adults; girls who “bully” others are less likely than boys to admit their behavior.

Cognitive and personality differences are magnified when children internalize gender-specific behaviors. Boys who aren’t tough are labeled sissies. Girls are expected to form closer bonds with their friends and to share feelings.

**Gender Patterns in Delinquency**

Over the past decades, females have increased their participation in delinquent behaviors at a faster rate than males. Arrest data indicate that juvenile females make up a greater percentage of the arrest statistics today than they did thirty years ago. In 1967, females constituted 13 percent of all juvenile index-crime arrests; today they make up about 25 percent. The most recent arrest data show that between 1993 and 2002 the total teenage male arrest rate decreased by about 16 percent and the female rate increased by 6 percent. Even more striking was the relative change in arrests for serious violent crimes—during a period of falling crime rates (1993 to 2002), teenage male violent crime arrests declined 39 percent, while female arrests declined a more modest 13 percent.

The Monitoring the Future self-report study also shows that patterns of male and female criminality appear to be converging. Self-report data indicate that the rank-ordering of male and female deviant behaviors is similar. The illegal acts most common for boys—petty larceny, using a false ID, and smoking marijuana—are also the ones most frequently committed by girls.

**Violent Behavior**

Gender differences in the delinquency rate may be narrowing, but males continue to be overrepresented in arrests for violent crimes. For example, almost all homicide offenders are males. In 2002, of the more than 973 juveniles arrested for murder, only 101 were female.

One reason for the gender disparity in lethal violence is that males and females display differences in the victims they target and the weapons they use. The typical male juvenile kills a friend or acquaintance with a handgun during an argument. In contrast, the typical female is as likely to kill a family member as an acquaintance.
and is more likely to use a knife. Both males and females tend to kill males—generally their brothers, fathers, or friends.

Why do these differences occur, and why are girls increasing their involvement in delinquent activities at a faster pace than boys? The wide range of opinions on these questions will be presented in the remaining sections of this chapter.

ARE FEMALE DELINQUENTS BORN THAT WAY?

There is a long tradition of tracing gender differences in delinquency to traits that are uniquely male or female. The argument that biological and psychological differences between males and females can explain differences in crime rates is not a new one. The earliest criminologists focused on physical characteristics believed to be precursors of crime.

Early Biological Explanations

With the publication in 1895 of *The Female Offender*, Lombroso (with William Ferrero) extended his work on criminality to females. Lombroso maintained that women were lower on the evolutionary scale than men, more childlike and less intelligent. Women who committed crimes could be distinguished from “normal” women by physical characteristics—excessive body hair, wrinkles, and an abnormal cranium, for example. In appearance, delinquent females appeared closer to men than to other women. The masculinity hypothesis suggested that delinquent girls had excessive male characteristics.

Lombrosian thought had a significant influence for much of the twentieth century. Delinquency rate differentials were explained in terms of gender-based differences. For example, in 1925 Cyril Burt linked female delinquency to menstruation. Similarly, William Healy and Augusta Bronner suggested that males’ physical superiority enhanced their criminality. Their research showed that about 70 percent of the delinquent girls they studied had abnormal weight and size, a finding that supported the “masculinity hypothesis.”

So-called experts suggested that female delinquency goes unrecorded because the female is the instigator rather than the perpetrator. Females first use their sexual charms to instigate crime and then beguile males in the justice system to obtain deferential treatment. This observation, referred to as the chivalry hypothesis, holds that gender differences in the delinquency rate can be explained by the fact that female criminality is overlooked or forgiven by male agents of the justice system. Those who believe in the chivalry hypothesis point to data showing that even though women make up about 20 percent of arrestees, they account for less than 5 percent of inmates. Police and other justice system personnel may be less willing to penalize female offenders than male offenders.

Early Psychological Explanations

Psychologists also viewed the physical differences between males and females as a basis for their behavior differentials. Sigmund Freud maintained that girls interpret their lack of a penis as a sign that they have been punished. Boys fear that they can be punished by having their penis cut off, and thus learn to fear women. From this conflict comes penis envy, which often produces an inferiority complex in girls, forcing them to make an effort to compensate for their “defect.” One way to compensate is to identify with their mothers and accept a maternal role. Also, girls may attempt to compensate for their lack of a penis by dressing well and beautifying themselves. Freud also claimed that “if a little girl persists in her first wish—to grow into a boy—in extreme cases she will end as a manifest homosexual, and otherwise she will exhibit
markedly masculine traits in the conduct of her later life, will choose a masculine vocation, and so on.41

At midcentury, psychodynamic theorists suggested that girls are socialized to be passive, which helps explain their low crime rate. However, this condition also makes some females susceptible to being manipulated by men; hence, their participation in sex-related crimes such as prostitution. A girl’s wayward behavior, psychoanalysts suggested, was restricted to neurotic theft (kleptomania) and overt sexual acts, which were symptoms of personality maladaptation.42

According to these early versions of the psychoanalytic approach, gender differences in the delinquency rate can be traced to differences in psychological orientation. Male delinquency reflects aggressive traits, whereas female delinquency is a function of repressed sexuality, gender conflict, and abnormal socialization.

Contemporary Trait Views

Contemporary biosocial and psychological theorists have continued the tradition of attributing gender differences in delinquency to physical and emotional traits (see Figure 6.1). These theorists recognize that it is the interaction of biological and psychological traits with the social environment that produces delinquency.

Precocious Sexuality

Early theorists linked female delinquency to early or precocious sexuality. According to this view, girls who experience an early onset of physical maturity are most likely to engage in antisocial behavior.43 Female delinquents were believed to be promiscuous and more sophisticated than male delinquents.44 Linking female delinquency to sexuality was responsible, in part, for the view that female delinquency is symptomatic of maladjustment.45

Equating female delinquency purely with sexual activity is no longer taken seriously, but early sexuality has been linked to other problems, such as a higher risk of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.46 Empirical evidence suggests that girls who reach puberty at an early age are at the highest risk for delinquency.47 One reason is that “early bloomers” may be more attractive to older adolescent boys, and increased contact with this high-risk group places the girls in jeopardy for antisocial behavior. Girls who are more developed relative to their peers are more likely to socialize at an early age and to get involved in deviant behaviors, especially “party deviance,” such as drinking, smoking, and substance abuse. Early puberty is most likely to encourage delinquent activities that occur in the context of socializing with peers and having romantic relationships with boys.48 The delinquency gap between early and late bloomers narrows when the latter group reaches sexual maturity and increases in exposure to boys.49 Biological and social factors seem to interact to postpone or accelerate female delinquent activity.

Hormonal Effects

As you may recall from chapter 3, some biosocial theorists link antisocial behavior to hormonal influences.50 One view is that hormonal imbalance may influence aggressive behavior. For example, changes in the level of the hormone cortisol, which is secreted by the adrenal glands in response to any kind of physical or psychological stress, has been linked to conduct problems in young girls.51

Another view is that excessive amounts of male hormones (androgens) are related to delinquency. The androgen most often related to antisocial behavior is testosterone.52 In general, females who test higher for testosterone are more likely to engage in stereotypical male behaviors.53 Females who have low androgen levels are less aggressive than males, whereas those who have elevated levels will take on characteristically male traits, including aggression.54

Some females are overexposed to male hormones in utero. Females affected this way may become “constitutionally masculinized.” They may develop abnormal hair growth, large musculature, low voice, irregular menstrual cycle, and hyperaggressiveness; this condition can also develop as a result of steroid use or certain medical dis-
orders. Author Diana Fishbein has reviewed the literature in this area and finds that, after holding constant a variety of factors (including IQ, age, and environment), females exposed to male hormones in utero are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior later in life.

**Premenstrual Syndrome** Early biotheorists suspected that premenstrual syndrome (PMS) was a direct cause of the relatively rare instances of female violence: “For several days prior to and during menstruation, the stereotype has been that ‘raging hormones’ doom women to irritability and poor judgment—two facets of premenstrual syndrome.” The link between PMS and delinquency was popularized by Katharina Dalton, whose studies of Englishwomen led her to conclude that females are more likely to commit suicide and be aggressive and otherwise antisocial before or during menstruation.

Today there is conflicting evidence on the relationship between PMS and female delinquency. Diana Fishbein, an expert on biosocial theory, concludes that there is an association between elevated levels of female aggression and menstruation. Research shows that a significant number of incarcerated females committed their crimes during the premenstrual phase, and also that a small percentage of women appear vulnerable to cyclical hormonal changes that make them more prone to anxiety and hostility. Fishbein notes that even though a majority of women do not actually engage in criminal behavior during their menstrual cycle the evidence does show a link. While this evidence is persuasive, the true relationship between crime and the female menstrual cycle still remains unknown.

**Aggression** According to some biosocial theorists, gender differences in the delinquency rate can be explained by inborn differences in aggression; males are inherently

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**Figure 6.1 Trait Differences in Male and Female Delinquents**

A longitudinal study that followed children born on the Hawaiian island of Kauai in 1955 for thirty-two years found that the most reliable traits for predicting delinquency in boys included these:

- Disordered care-taking
- Lack of educational stimulation in the home
- Reading problems
- A need for remedial education by age 10
- Late maturation
- An unemployed, criminal, or absent father

In addition, boys appeared to be particularly vulnerable to early childhood learning problems, leading to school failure. A combination of reaching puberty late and lack of a significant male role model also encouraged the persistence of antisocial behavior throughout adolescence.

In the same longitudinal study, researchers found that delinquent girls tend to have the following traits:

- A history of minor congenital defects
- Low development scores by age 2
- A need for mental health services by age 10
- Earlier-than-average onset of puberty

Researchers hypothesize that birth defects and slow early development could lead to poor self-esteem, whereas early sexual development may encourage sexual relationships with older males and conflict with parents.

more likely to be aggressive. Some psychologists have suggested that these differences are present very early in life, appearing before socialization can influence behavior. Males seem to be more aggressive in all societies for which data are available; gender differences in aggression can even be found in nonhuman primates.

Some biosocial theorists argue that gender-based differences in aggression reflect the dissimilarities in the male and female reproductive systems. Males are more aggressive because they wish to possess as many sex partners as possible to increase their chances of producing offspring. Females have learned to control their aggressive impulses because having multiple mates does not increase their chances of conception. Instead, females concentrate on acquiring things that will help them rear their offspring, such as a reliable mate who will supply material resources.

Contemporary Psychological Views

Because girls are socialized to be less aggressive than boys, it is possible that the young women who do get involved in antisocial and violent behavior are suffering from some form of mental anguish or abnormality. Girls are also more likely than boys to be involved in status offenses such as running away and truancy, behaviors that suggest underlying psychological distress.

Research indicates that antisocial adolescent girls do suffer a wide variety of psychiatric problems and have dysfunctional and violent relationships. Incarcerated adolescent female offenders have more acute mental health symptoms and psychological disturbances than male offenders. Female delinquents score high on psychological tests measuring such traits as psychopathic deviation, schizophrenia, paranoia, and psychasthenia (a psychological disorder characterized by phobias, obsessions, compulsions, or excessive anxiety). Clinical interviews indicate that female delinquents are significantly more likely than males to suffer from mood disorders, including any disruptive disorder, major depressive disorder, and separation anxiety disorder. For example, serious female delinquents have been found to have a relatively high incidence of callous-unemotional (CU) traits, an affective disorder described by a lack of remorse or shame, poor judgment, failure to learn by experience, and chronic lying. In sum, there are some experts who believe that female delinquents suffer from psychological deficits ranging from lack of self-control to serious impairments.

SOCIALIZATION VIEWS

Socialization views are based on the idea that a child’s social development may be the key to understanding delinquent behavior. If a child experiences impairment, family disruption, and so on, the child will be more susceptible to delinquent associations and criminality.

Linking crime rate variations to gender differences in socialization is not a recent phenomenon. In a 1928 work, The Unadjusted Girl, W. I. Thomas suggested that some girls who have not been socialized under middle-class family controls can become impulsive thrill seekers. According to Thomas, female delinquency is linked to the “wish” for luxury and excitement. Inequities in social class condemn poor girls from demoralized families to using sex as a means to gain amusement, pretty clothes, and other luxuries. Precocious sexuality makes these girls vulnerable to older men, who lead them down the path to decadence.

Socialization and Delinquency

Scholars concerned with gender differences in crime are interested in the distinction between the lifestyles of males and females. Girls may be supervised more closely than boys. If girls behave in a socially disapproved fashion, their parents may be more likely to notice. Adults may be more tolerant of deviant behavior in boys and expect boys to act tough and take risks. Closer supervision restricts the opportu-
nity for crime and the time available to mingle with delinquent peers. It follows, then, that the adolescent girl who is growing up in a troubled home and lacks supervision may be more prone to delinquency.75

Focus on Socialization In the 1950s, a number of researchers began to focus on gender-specific socialization patterns. They made three assumptions about gender differences in socialization: families exert a more powerful influence on girls than on boys; girls do not form close same-sex friendships but compete with their peers; and female criminals are primarily sexual offenders. First, parents are stricter with girls because they perceive them as needing control. In some families, adolescent girls rebel against strict controls. In others, where parents are absent or unavailable, girls may turn to the streets for companionship. Second, girls rarely form close relationships with female peers because they view them as rivals for males who would make eligible marriage partners.76 Instead, girls enter into affairs with older men who exploit them, involve them in sexual deviance, and father their illegitimate children.77 The result is prostitution, drug abuse, and marginal lives. Their daughters repeat this pattern in a never-ending cycle of exploitation.

Broken Homes/Fallen Women A number of experts share emphasis on the family as a primary influence on delinquent behavior. Male delinquents were portrayed as rebels who esteemed "toughness," "excitement," and other lower-class values. Males succumbed to the lure of delinquency when they perceived few legitimate opportunities. In contrast, female delinquents were portrayed as troubled adolescents who suffered inadequate home lives, and more often than not, were victims of sexual and physical abuse. Ruth Morris described delinquent girls as unattractive youths who reside in homes marked by family tensions.78 In The Delinquent Girl (1970), Clyde Vedder and Dora Somerville suggest that female delinquency is usually a problem of adjustment to family pressure; an estimated 75 percent of institutionalized girls have family problems.79 They also suggest that girls have serious problems in a male-dominated culture with rigid and sometimes unfair social practices.

Other early efforts linked "rebellious" behavior to sexual conflicts in the home.80 Broken or disrupted homes were found to predict female delinquency.81 Females petitioned to juvenile court were more likely than males to be charged with ungovernable behavior and sex offenses. They also were more likely to reside in single-parent homes.82 Studies of incarcerated juveniles found that most of the male delinquents were incarcerated for burglary and other theft-related offenses, but female delinquents tended to be involved in incorrigibility and sex offenses. The conclusion: boys became delinquent to demonstrate their masculinity; girls were delinquent because of hostility toward parents and a consequent need to obtain attention from others.83

Contemporary Socialization Views Investigators continue to support the view that female delinquents have more dysfunctional home lives than male offenders.84 Institutionalized girls tell of lives filled with severe physical and sexual abuse. In addition to tragic home lives, delinquent girls report social experiences that were frustrating or even degrading.85
Girls seem to be more deeply affected than boys by child abuse, and the link between abuse and female delinquency seems stronger than it is for male delinquency. A significant amount of female delinquency can be traced to abuse in the home. Meda Chesney-Lind, a prominent feminist scholar, has described this association: "Young women on the run from homes characterized by sexual abuse and parental neglect are forced, by the very statutes designed to protect them, into the life of an escaped convict." Girls may be forced into a life of sexual promiscuity because their sexual desirability makes them a valuable commodity for families living on the edge. For example, girls may be "lent out" to drug dealers so their parents or partners can get high. Girls on the streets are encouraged to sell their bodies because they have little else of value to trade. Many of these girls may find themselves pregnant at a very young age. A number of programs have been created to help prevent teen pregnancy and to help girls who find themselves pregnant. This is the topic of the above Preventing and Treating Delinquency feature.

LEAP
One teen parenting program that has been popular is the Ohio-based Learning, Earning, and Parenting program (LEAP). The LEAP program aims at requiring teen moms either to attend high school or to attempt to earn a GED in order to attain financial assistance from the state's Aid to Families with Dependant Children (AFDC). They are also awarded an additional monthly stipend if they attend school and have an equal amount deducted if they drop out. Upon graduation, they are awarded an additional stipend.

The LEAP program strives to help teens continue their high school education, gain employment skills, and also learn effective parenting skills. Evaluations show that the program does in fact increase participants' school enrollment and attendance. However, graduation rates increased only for those teen moms who were already enrolled in school when the program was implemented, not for those who entered after the program was announced. Nonetheless, four-year follow-up tests indicate that the program can be a big help, especially in boosting employment among these teens.

LEAP has proven so successful that it is being adopted in Canada. The Canadian program requires that each teen complete high school credits and take thirty-five hours of parenting classes. Once both these requirements are completed, teens are awarded $500, which can be put away toward further education for themselves or for the child's future education.

GRADS
The Graduation, Reality, and Dual-Role Skills (GRADS) program is a voluntary program for pregnant teenagers or teen parents who are in the seventh through twelfth grades. Also developed in Ohio, GRADS comprises four main areas: pregnancy, parenting, balancing work and family, and security and happiness. Participants attend classes taught by licensed and certified instructors. They are also placed in individual counseling and participate in group sessions with other teen parents. In addition, guest speakers from different organizations, such as Planned Parenthood, come in to enrich the classroom experience.

Girls seem to be more deeply affected than boys by child abuse, and the link between abuse and female delinquency seems stronger than it is for male delinquency. A significant amount of female delinquency can be traced to abuse in the home. Meda Chesney-Lind, a prominent feminist scholar, has described this association: "Young women on the run from homes characterized by sexual abuse and parental neglect are forced, by the very statutes designed to protect them, into the life of an escaped convict." Girls may be forced into a life of sexual promiscuity because their sexual desirability makes them a valuable commodity for families living on the edge. For example, girls may be "lent out" to drug dealers so their parents or partners can get high. Girls on the streets are encouraged to sell their bodies because they have little else of value to trade. Many of these girls may find themselves pregnant at a very young age. A number of programs have been created to help prevent teen pregnancy and to help girls who find themselves pregnant. This is the topic of the above Preventing and Treating Delinquency feature.

There is a significant body of literature linking abusive home lives to gang participation and crime. Joan Moore's analysis of gang girls in East Los Angeles found that many came from troubled homes. Sixty-eight percent of the girls she interviewed were afraid of their fathers, and 55 percent reported fear of their mothers. Many of the girls reported that their parents were overly strict and controlling, despite the fact that they engaged in criminality themselves. Moore also details accounts of sexual abuse; about 30 percent of the girls reported that family members had made sexual advances.
Gaarder and Joanne Belknap’s interviews with young women sent to adult prisons indicated that most had endured prolonged sexual abuse and violence. For example, Lisa, a young White woman serving time for attempted murder, had used drugs, alcohol, and joined gangs to escape the pain and troubles of her home life. Her mother was an alcoholic, and her father a convicted rapist. She had been sexually and physically abused by her stepfather from the ages of nine to eleven. Soon after, Lisa began skipping school, started using alcohol, and took acid. She joined a gang when she was twelve. “They were like a family to me,” she told Gaarder and Belknap. “But I became involved in a lot of stuff. . . . I got high a lot, I robbed people, burglarized homes, stabbed people, and was involved in drive-bys.” At age fifteen, she stabbed a woman in a fight. She is serving seven to fifteen years for the crime. She made this statement:

“I had just gotten out of this group home. The lady I stabbed had been messing with my sister’s fiancé. This woman [had] a bunch of my sister’s stuff, like her stereo and VCR, so me, my sister, her fiancé, and my boyfriend went over to pick up the stuff. We were all getting high beforehand. When we got to the house, my sister and I went in. . . . They [her sister and the victim] started fighting over him, and I started stabbing her with a knife. I always carried a knife with me because I was in a gang.”

In summary, the socialization approach holds that family interaction is the key to understanding female delinquency. If a girl grows up in an atmosphere of sexual tension, where hostility exists between her parents, or where her parents are absent, she is...
likely to turn to outside sources for support. Girls are expected to follow narrowly
defined behavioral patterns. In contrast, it is not unusual for boys to stay out late,
drive around with friends, or get involved in other unstructured behaviors linked to
delinquency. If in reaction to loneliness and parental hostility, girls engage in the same
“routine activities” as boys (staying out late, partying, and riding around with
friends), they run the risk of engaging in similar types of delinquent behavior.93

The socialization approach holds that a poor home life is likely to have an even
more damaging effect on females than on males. Because girls are less likely than
boys to have close-knit peer associations, they are more likely to need close parental
relationships to retain emotional stability. In fact, girls may become sexually in-
volved with boys to receive support from them, a practice that tends to magnify
their problems.

**LIBERAL FEMINIST VIEWS**

The feminist movement has, from its origins, fought to help women break away
from their traditional roles and gain economic, educational, and social advancement.
There is little question that the women’s movement has revised the way women per-
ceive their roles in society, and it has altered the relationships of women to many
social institutions.

**Liberal feminism** has influenced thinking about delinquency. According to lib-
eral feminists, females are less delinquent than males because their social roles pro-
vide fewer opportunities to commit crime. As the roles of women become more
similar to those of men, so will their crime patterns. Female criminality is motivated
by the same influences as male criminality. According to Freda Adler’s important
book *Sisters in Crime* (1975), by striving for independence women have begun to
alter the institutions that had protected males in their traditional positions of
power.94 Adler argued that female delinquency would be affected by the changing
role of women. As females entered new occupations and participated in sports, poli-
tics, and other traditionally male endeavors, they would also become involved in
crimes that had heretofore been male-oriented; delinquency rates would then con-
verge. She noted that girls were becoming increasingly involved in traditionally
masculine crimes such as gang activity and fighting.

Adler predicted that the women’s movement would produce steeper increases in
the rate of female delinquency because it created an environment in which the roles
of girls and boys converge. She predicted that the changing female role would pro-
duce female criminals who are similar to their male counterparts.95

**Support for Liberal Feminism**

A number of studies support the feminist view of gender differences in delinquency.96
More than twenty years ago, Rita James Simon explained how the increase in female
criminality is a function of the changing role of women. She claimed that as women
were empowered economically and socially, they would be less likely to feel dependent
and oppressed. Consequently, they would be less likely to attack their traditional tar-
gets: their husbands, their lovers, or even their own children.97 Instead, their new role
as breadwinner might encourage women to engage in traditional male crimes, such
as larceny and car theft.

Simon’s view has been supported in part by research showing a significant corre-
lation between the women’s rights movement and the female crime rate.98 If 1966 is
used as a jumping-off point (because the National Organization for Women was
founded in that year), there are indications that patterns of serious female crime
(robery and auto theft) correlate with indicators of female emancipation (the di-
orce rate and participation in the labor force). Although this research does not
prove that female crime is related to social change, it identifies behavior patterns
that support that hypothesis.
According to liberal feminists, females are less delinquent than males because their social roles provide them with fewer opportunities to commit crime. As the roles of girls and women become more similar to those of males, so too will their crime patterns. Female criminality is actually motivated by the same crime-producing influences as male criminality. The fact that female delinquency is rising at a faster rate than male delinquency reflects the convergence of their social roles.

In addition to these efforts, self-report studies support the liberal feminist view by showing that gender differences in delinquency are fading; that is, the delinquent acts committed most and least often by girls are nearly identical to those reported most and least often by boys. The pattern of female delinquency, if not the extent, is now similar to that of male delinquency, and with few exceptions the factors that seem to motivate both male and female criminality seem similar. For example, research shows that economic disadvantages are felt equally by both male and female residents.

As the sex roles of males and females have become less distinct, their offending patterns have become more similar. Girls may be committing crimes to gain economic advancement and not because they lack parental support. Both of these patterns were predicted by liberal feminists.

Critiques of Liberal Feminism

Not all delinquency experts believe changing sex roles influence crime rates. Some argue that the delinquent behavior patterns of girls have remained static and have not been influenced by the women’s movement. Females involved in violent crime more often than not have some connection to a male partner who influences their behavior. One study of women who kill in the course of their involvement in the drug trade found that they kill on behalf of a man or out of fear of a man.

Others dispute that changes in female delinquency rates relate to the feminist movement. Self-report studies show that female participation in most crime has remained stable for the past ten years. It is possible that the women’s movement has not influenced crime rates as much as previously thought. Perhaps the greater participation by females in the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) arrest data is more a function of how police are treating females than an actual change in female behavior patterns.

CRITICAL FEMINIST VIEWS

A number of writers take a more critical view of gender differences in crime. These scholars can be categorized as critical feminists (sometimes known as Marxist feminists) who believe gender inequality stems from the unequal power of men and...
women in a capitalist society and the exploitation of females by fathers and husbands: under capitalism, women are a “commodity” like land or money.106 Female delinquency originates with the onset of male supremacy (patriarchy), the subordination of women, male aggression, and the efforts of men to control females sexually.107 Critical feminists focus on the social forces that shape girls’ lives.108 They attempt to show how the sexual victimization of girls is often a function of male socialization and that young males learn to be exploitive of women. James Messerschmidt, an influential feminist scholar, has formulated a theoretical model to show how misguided concepts of “masculinity” flow from the inequities built into “patriarchal capitalism.” Men dominate business in capitalist societies, and males who cannot function well within its parameters are at risk for crime. Women are inherently powerless in such a society, and their crimes reflect their limited access to both legitimate and illegitimate opportunity.109 It is not surprising that research surveys have found that 90 percent of adolescent girls are sexually harassed in school, with almost 30 percent reporting having been psychologically pressured to “do something sexual,” and 10 percent physically forced into sexual behaviors.110 According to the critical feminist view, male exploitation acts as a trigger for female delinquent behavior. Female delinquents recount being so severely harassed at school that they were forced to carry knives. Some reported that boyfriends—men sometimes in their thirties—who “knew how to treat a girl” would draw them into criminal activity such as drug trafficking, which eventually entangled them in the justice system.111

When female adolescents run away and use drugs, they may be reacting to abuse at home or at school. Their attempts at survival are then labeled delinquent.112 Research shows that a significant number of girls who are victims of sexual and other forms of abuse later engage in delinquency.113 All too often, school officials ignore complaints made by female students. Young girls therefore may feel trapped and desperate.

Crime and Patriarchy

A number of theoretical models have attempted to use a critical or Marxist feminist perspective to explain gender differences in delinquency. For example, in Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Crime, Marxist James Messerschmidt argues that capitalist society is characterized by both patriarchy and class conflict. Capitalists control workers, and men control women, both economically and biologically.114 This “double marginality” explains why females in a capitalist society commit fewer crimes than males: they are isolated in the family and have fewer opportunities to engage in elite deviance (white-collar and economic crimes); they are also denied access to male-dominated street crimes. Because capitalism renders women powerless, they are forced to commit less serious crimes such as abusing drugs.

Power-Control Theory

John Hagan and his associates have speculated that gender differences in delinquency are a function of class differences that influence family life. Hagan, who calls his view power-control theory, suggests that class influences delinquency by controlling the quality of family life.115 In paternalistic families, fathers assume the role of breadwinners and mothers have menial jobs or remain at home. Mothers are expected to control the behavior of their daughters while granting greater freedom to sons. The parent-daughter relationship can be viewed as a preparation for the “cult of domesticity,” which makes daughters’ involvement in delinquency unlikely. Hence, males exhibit a higher degree of delinquent behavior than their sisters.

In egalitarian families—in which the husband and wife share similar positions of power at home and in the workplace—daughters gain a kind of freedom similar to that of sons and their law-violating behaviors mirror those of their brothers.
According to power-control theory, when girls grow up in egalitarian families, where the husband and the wife share similar positions of power at home and in the workplace, they achieve freedom and independence.

**Checkpoints**

- There are a variety of views on why girls become delinquent and why there are gender differences in the crime rate.
- At one time it was believed that girls were naturally less aggressive and female criminals were a biological aberration.
- Some experts still believe that hormonal differences can explain why males are more aggressive.
- Some experts believe that males are more aggressive because they have evolved that way to secure mates.
- Under some circumstances females may act more aggressively than males.
- Some experts believe that girls have been socialized to be less violent.
- Female delinquents may be the product of a destructive home life, rebelling against abusive parents.
- The liberal feminist view is that girls did not have the same opportunities to commit crime as boys and that rising female crime rates represent changing life circumstances.
- Critical feminists see female delinquency as a function of male domination and abuse.

To quiz yourself on this material, go to questions 6.6–6.20 on the Juvenile Delinquency: The Core 2e Web site.

Associates found that when both fathers and mothers hold equally valued managerial positions the similarity between the rates of their daughters’ and sons’ delinquency is greatest. Therefore, middle-class girls are most likely to violate the law because they are less closely controlled than lower-class girls.

Research conducted by Hagan and his colleagues has tended to support the core relationship between family structure and gender differences in delinquency. However, some of the basic premises of power-control theory, such as the relationship between social class and delinquency, have been challenged. For example, some critics have questioned the assumption that upper-class youths may engage in more petty delinquency than lower-class youths because they are brought up to be “risk takers” who do not fear the consequences of their misdeeds.

Power-control theory encourages a new approach to the study of delinquency, one that addresses gender differences, class position, and family structure. It also helps explain the relative increase in female delinquency by stressing the significance of changing feminine roles. With the increase in single-parent homes, the patterns Hagan has identified may change. The decline of the patriarchal family may produce looser family ties on girls, changing sex roles, and increased delinquency. Ironically, this raises an interesting dilemma: the daughters of successful and powerful mothers are more at risk for delinquency than the daughters of stay-at-home moms! However, as sociologist Christopher Uggen points out, there may be a bright side to this dilemma: the daughters of independent working mothers may not only be more likely to commit delinquent acts but also be encouraged to take prosocial risks such as engaging in athletic competition and breaking into traditional male-dominated occupations such as policing and the military.

**GENDER AND THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM**

Gender differences not only have an effect on crime patterns but also may have a significant impact on the way children are treated by the juvenile justice system. Several feminist scholars argue that girls are not only the victims of injustice at home but also risk being victimized by agents of the justice system.

Are girls still “victims” of the juvenile justice system? Meda Chesney-Lind’s well-regarded research found that police are more likely to arrest female adolescents for
sexual activity and to ignore the same behavior among male delinquents. Girls were also more likely to be sent to a detention facility before trial, and the length of their detention averaged three times that of boys. Girls are far more likely than boys to be picked up by police for status offenses and are more likely to be kept in detention for such offenses.

Girls, more than boys, are still disadvantaged if their behavior is viewed as morally incorrect by government officials or if they are considered beyond parental control. Recent research conducted by John MacDonald and Meda Chesney-Lind found that the juvenile justice system still categorizes female offenders into two distinct groups: girls who momentarily strayed from the “good girl” path and are therefore deserving of solicitous, humanitarian treatment, and dangerously wayward girls who have serious problems and must therefore be kept under strict control lest they stray further.

Girls may also be feeling the brunt of the more punitive policies now being used in the juvenile justice system. For example, when Chesney-Lind and Vickie Paramore analyzed data from the City and County of Honolulu they found that tougher juvenile justice standards meant that more cases were being handled formally in the juvenile justice system. While girls are actually committing fewer violent crimes, they are more likely to become enmeshed in the grasp of the juvenile justice system. Once in the system, they may receive fewer benefits and services than their male counterparts. Institutionalized girls report that they are given fewer privileges and less space, equipment, programs, and treatment than institutionalized boys.

Girls may still be subject to harsh punishments if they are considered dangerously immoral. Girls are significantly more likely to be arrested on status offense charges than boys. However, the arrest rates for girls show that girls are charged with status offenses more often than boys because some of the behaviors they are participating in are considered negative when perpetrated by a female but would not gain official attention if engaged in by a male.

There still appears to be an association between male standards of “beauty” and sexual behavior: criminal justice professionals may look on attractive girls who engage in sexual behavior more harshly, overlooking some of the same behaviors in less attractive girls. In some jurisdictions, girls are still being incarcerated for status offenses because their behavior does not measure up to concepts of “proper” female behavior. Even though girls are still less likely to be arrested than boys, those who fail to measure up to stereotypes of proper female behavior are more likely to be sanctioned than male offenders.

Why do these differences persist? Perhaps because correctional authorities continue to subscribe to stereotyped beliefs about the needs of young girls. Writing in 1998 with Randall Shelden, Meda Chesney-Lind found that court officials and policymakers still show a lack of concern about girls’ victimization and instead are more concerned with controlling their behavior than addressing the factors that brought them to the attention of the juvenile justice system in the first place.

SUMMARY

- The relationship between gender and delinquency has become a topic of considerable interest to criminologists.
- At one time, attention was directed solely at male offenders and the rare female delinquent was considered an oddity. The nature and extent of female delinquent activities have changed, and girls are now engaging in more frequent and serious illegal activity.
- Sociologists and psychologists recognize that there are differences in attitudes, values, and behavior between boys and girls.
- There are cognitive differences. Females process information differently than males do and have different cognitive and physical strengths. These differences may, in part, explain gender differences in delinquency.
- Girls are socialized differently, which causes them to internalize rather than externalize anger and aggression.
- There are also psychological differences between the sexes. Girls may actually be at risk for a greater level of mental anguish than boys.
There are a number of different views of female delinquency.

Trait views are concerned with biological and psychological differences between the sexes. Early efforts by Cesare Lombroso and his followers placed the blame for delinquency on physical differences between males and females. Girls who were delinquent had inherent masculine characteristics.

Contemporary trait theorists view girls’ psychological makeup and hormonal and physical characteristics as key to their delinquent behavior.

Socialization has also been identified as a cause of delinquency. Males are socialized to be tough and aggressive, females to be passive and obedient.

Early socialization views portrayed the adolescent female offender as a troubled girl who lacked love at home and supportive peer relations.

These theories treated female delinquents as sexual offenders whose criminal activities were linked to destructive relationships with men.

Contemporary socialization views continue to depict female delinquents as being raised in hellish homes where they are victims of sexual and physical abuse.

More recent views of gender and delinquency incorporate the changes brought about by the women’s movement. Liberal feminists argue that, as the roles of women change, so will their crime patterns. Although a number of studies support this view, some theorists question its validity. The female crime rate has increased, and female delinquency patterns now resemble those of males, but the gender gap has not narrowed after more than two decades.

Critical feminists view female delinquency as a function of patriarchy and the mistreatment and exploitation of females in a male-dominated society.

Hagan’s power-control theory helps us understand why these differences exist and whether change may be coming.

The treatment girls receive by the juvenile justice system has also been the subject of debate. Originally, it was thought that police protected girls from the stigma of a delinquency label. Contemporary criminologists charge, however, that girls are discriminated against by agents of the justice system.

KEY TERMS

- masculinity hypothesis, p. 136
- gender-schema theory, p. 139
- precocious sexuality, p. 142
- chivalry hypothesis, p. 141
- liberal feminism, p. 148
- critical feminists, p. 148
- power-control theory, p. 150
- egalitarian families, p. 150

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Are girls delinquent for different reasons than boys? Do girls have a unique set of problems?
2. As sex roles become more homogenous, do you believe female delinquency will become identical to male delinquency in rate and type?
3. Does the sexual double standard still exist?
4. Are lower-class girls more strictly supervised than upper- and middle-class girls? Is control stratified across class lines?
5. Are girls the victims of unfairness at the hands of the justice system, or do they benefit from “chivalry?”

APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

As the principal of a northeastern junior high school, you get a call from a parent who is disturbed because he has heard a rumor that the student literary digest plans to publish a story with a sexual theme. The work is written by a junior high school girl who became pregnant during the year and underwent an abortion. You ask for and receive a copy of the narrative.

The girl’s story is actually a cautionary tale of young love that results in an unwanted pregnancy. The author details the abusive home life that led her to engage in an intimate relationship with another student, her pregnancy, her conflict with her parents, her decision to abort, and the emotional turmoil that the incident created. She tells students to use contraception if they are sexually active and recommends appropriate types of birth control. There is nothing provocative or sexually explicit in the work.

Some teachers argue that girls should not be allowed to read this material because it has sexual content from which they must be protected, and that in a sense it advocates defiance of parents. Also, some parents may object to...
a story about precocious sexuality because they fear it may encourage their children to “experiment.” Such behavior is linked to delinquency and drug abuse. Those who advocate publication believe that girls have a right to read about such important issues and decide on their own course of action.

• Should you force the story’s deletion because its theme is essentially sexual and controversial?
• Should you allow publication because it deals with the subject matter in a mature fashion?

• Do you think reading and learning about sexual matters encourages or discourages experimentation in sexuality?
• Should young girls be protected from such material? Would it cause them damage?
• Inequalities still exist in the way boys and girls are socialized by their parents and treated by social institutions. Do these gender differences also manifest themselves in the delinquency rate? What effect do gender roles have on behavior choices?

To help you answer these questions and to find out more information on the gender of status offenders, click on Web Links under the Chapter Resources at http://cj.wadsworth.com/siegel_jdcore2e. Then go to the Web site for Hazelwood School District et al. v. Kuhlmeier et al. and other landmark cases; go also to the National Scholastic Press Association and the high school journalism Web site to read more about school news and censorship issues.

Pro/Con discussions and Viewpoint Essays on some of the topics in this chapter may be found at the Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center: www.gale.com/OpposingViewpoints.