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Public views toward crime and correctional policies Is there a gender gap?

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Abstract

Differences between men and women in their proximity to crime, moral development, and attitudes toward an array of social issues suggest that a gender gap in crime views may exist. Investigations of this possibility, however, are in short supply. Using a statewide data set and a variety of global and specific questions about crime policy, punishment, and rehabilitation, this study found that men and women tend to hold moderately divergent views. Women tend to express greater support for offender treatment and less support for punishment than men. Implications of these results for the future of correctional and crime policy are discussed. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

For more than six decades, political scientists have devoted considerable attention to differences between men and women in policy preferences and voting behavior. Even greater efforts have been made to understand gender differences since the 1980 presidential election. In fact, it has become commonplace to refer to a “gender gap” in citizens’ candidate choices and preferences for social policies (Borquez, Goldenberg, & Kahn, 1988). Substantially less attention has been focused on possible differences between men’s and women’s views on crime and corrections. Despite salient theoretical perspectives that might be applied, only a few studies have explored male–female differences in crime attitudes. This is not to say that gender has been completely absent from

research on crime opinions. Gender simply has not been a focal issue in most examinations of attitudes toward crime policies, punishment, and offender rehabilitation. This study sought to provide greater insight into gender differences by investigating, in a single analysis, men’s and women’s views across several aspects of crime policy and correctional policy.

Gender and crime views

Theoretical perspectives

It is somewhat surprising that criminologists have not devoted more attention to assessing whether a gender gap exists in crime views. As noted above, the existence of a gender gap is well established in a wide variety of other areas. Women are more supportive of social welfare, equal rights for homosexuals (Petersen & Donnerwerth, 1998), equal opportunities for women (Petersen & Donnerwerth, 1998; Studlar, McAllister, & Hayes, 1998), and education, and they

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are more concerned about healthcare and about protecting the environment (Shapiro & Mahajan, 1986; Steger & Witt, 1989). As Shapiro and Mahajan (1986) report, women also tend to oppose issues involving force or violence (e.g., national defense, military presence outside the United States, and the death penalty), oppose abortion, and support compassionate policies for disadvantaged groups (e.g., African Americans, the poor, and the elderly). Furthermore, since the 1980 presidential election, American women consistently have voted for Democratic candidates more often than have men. In a recent analysis of gender differences in voting, Studlar et al. (1998) found that the largest gap since 1964 was in 1992, when the percentage of women voting Democrat was ten percentage points higher than the percentage of men voting Democrat. The researchers' empirical examination of possible explanations for this difference revealed that men's and women's voting was indistinguishable once their views on several political issues were considered. Thus, women's voting patterns were different from men's because of gender differences in attitudes toward defense spending, spending on poverty, women's equality, abortion, and the death penalty (Studlar et al., 1998).

The divide between men and women on these social and political issues might be expected to spur criminologists to investigate gender differences in crime views. Taken together, the findings on women's views suggest that women, compared to men, are more compassionate and more concerned about the well-being of others, especially the socially disadvantaged. If these orientations also extend to attitudes toward offenders, greater support for rehabilitation and less support for punishment might also be expected among women.

Gilligan's (1982) propositions about moral differences between men and women suggest similar expectations about gender differences in crime attitudes. Gilligan (1977, 1982) proposes a theory of differential moral reasoning in which she argues that, although men base their decisions about right and wrong on an "ethic of justice," women's morality has a different foundation. Women do not emphasize individual rights and fairness. Instead, their moral decisions are based on "sensitivity to the needs of others and the assumption of responsibility for taking care" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 16). This "ethic of care" springs from an understanding of the interconnectedness of human relationships and a desire to minimize harm to oneself, to others, and to the relationships between individuals.

This position predicts a particular pattern of men's and women's attitudes toward crime policies. To the extent that people believe that rehabilitation helps offenders become more productive citizens and protects future victims, an ethic of care would predict

greater support for offender treatment among women. Similarly, a concern with alleviating harm would logically lead women to oppose capital punishment; obviously, the death penalty irreversibly harms the person being executed. Predictions about gender differences in support for other types of punishment, however, are less clear. Women may favor greater punitiveness in an effort to deter or incapacitate criminals, if this might be seen as a means of protecting potential victims. Deterrence and incapacitation, however, inherently visit harm on the offender. An alternative prediction stemming from Gilligan's (1982) theory of "different voices," therefore, seems more likely. Women who are in Gilligan's (1977) second stage of moral reasoning emphasize self-sacrifice in the pursuit of care and protection, and those at the third and highest stage act on a principle of nonviolence. Seeking to minimize harm, women might be oriented toward lesser punitiveness, instead preferring preventative crime policies that build stronger families and communities.

The aspects of the gender gap discussed thus far suggest that women would be less punitive and more supportive of preventative and rehabilitative approaches to crime. A third consideration, however, paints a different picture: proximity to crime. Miller, Rossi, and Simpson (1986) suggest that diverse social groupings may hold different views about punishment because of their proximity to crime and to criminal justice practices. Differentiating objective proximity from subjective proximity, these authors contend that objective proximity to crime refers to "the empirically determined probabilities of the occurrence of activities, events, or situations in which crime is implicated" (Miller et al., 1986, p. 316). Men and women, therefore, may disagree in their attitudes about crime because of their differential likelihood of offending, being victimized, being arrested, and so on. Miller et al. (1986, p. 316) use subjective proximity to crime to mean "the perceived probabilities of the same experiences." Gender differences in attitudes may be based on such considerations as fear of crime or perceived likelihood of arrest.

Regarding prior victimization as an indicator of objective proximity, the existing literature is largely consistent. Those who have been victimized by crime are no more punitive than those who have not been victimized (Blumstein & Cohen, 1980; McCorkle, 1993; Ouimet & Coyle, 1991; Stinchcombe et al., 1980; Tyler & Weber, 1982; cf. Keil & Vito, 1991). Victimization also appears to have no significant influence on support for rehabilitation (Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985; Langworthy & Whitehead, 1986; McCorkle, 1993).

In the realm of subjective proximity to crime, the empirical evidence on the relationship between fear

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