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Analysis of Demographic Variables of Women Evaluated in a Forensic Psychiatry Clinic in 1980 and 1981

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ABSTRACT: Descriptive statistics are presented for 76 female offenders evaluated in the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic for the New York County Criminal and Supreme Courts. Demographic data, sociological data, financial supports, criminal background, and psychiatric history are examined.

KEYWORDS: psychiatry, jurisprudence, demography

During the last decade, under the influence of the feminist movement, women's place in the world has come under an increasing amount of scrutiny from researchers on all levels. In the criminal justice field efforts have been made to correlate the assumption of more traditionally male roles in the workplace, the increasing numbers of women as heads of households, and changes in the attitude of law enforcement officials to increases in the crime rate among women [1]. The scope of this study does not permit generalization regarding the causes of criminality among women. However, it is directed towards the goal of providing information to criminal justice, mental health, and social service systems that might assist in the development of appropriate care and treatment procedures for those women who come to the attention of the courts.

Statement of Purpose

This study will attempt to address the following two issues:

1. Who are the women being referred to the Criminal Court section of the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic? What are their demographic characteristics and socioeconomic backgrounds?
2. What kinds of crimes have these women been accused of committing?

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The women in the study sample may not be considered as representative of all women arrested and charged with crimes in Manhattan during 1980 and 1981. There is an inherent bias in the process of referral to the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic that prohibits generalization from the data presented here.

Description of the Population

The population described here consists of those women who were admitted for diagnostic evaluation to the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic for the Criminal and Supreme Courts of New York County in 1980 and 1981 subsequent to arraignment on criminal charges. Descriptive data will be presented on the women's basic demographic profile (age, ethnicity, education), social support systems (family background, marital status), financial supports (employment, income), psychiatric profile (history of mental illness, substance abuse, current diagnostic impression), and criminal background (arrest record, current offense, sentence imposed). The Forensic Psychiatry Clinic, a division of the New York City Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Alcoholism Services, conducts examinations of defendants referred because of possible mental disease or defect by both the Criminal and Supreme Courts in Manhattan and the Manhattan and Brooklyn Departments of Probation.

Reports may be prepared for the courts evaluating a defendant's competency to proceed to trial. In such situations the women were evaluated regarding whether they suffered from a diagnosable mental disease or defect of such nature that they lack capacity to understand the nature of the charges against them or to understand courtroom proceedings or to cooperate in their own defense. Reports for the Probation Department provide information regarding the defendant's mental status which is used in the preparation of presentence investigations, the development of prepleading reports, or in after sentence follow-up investigations. In either instance defendants may be incarcerated in the custody of the New York City Department of Correction or may be on bail or released on their own recognizance pending adjudication.

The population of 76 women described herein consists of 32 referred for competency examination by the Manhattan Criminal Court, 29 referred by the Manhattan Office of the Probation Department, and 15 referred by the Brooklyn Probation Department. Seven of the women referred for competency were also later evaluated for the Manhattan Office of Probation. Criminal Court cases are considered here; Supreme Court referrals from the comparable time frame will be evaluated at a later date for purposes of comparison. The group includes those women who were actually seen in the Clinic by either a psychiatrist, a psychologist, or a paraprofessional mental health worker. During 1980 and 1981 an additional 33 women were referred to the Clinic but did not arrive for admission because of transfers to hospital based units, failure to keep appointments, or cancellation of appointments by Probation staff. The total number of 109 referrals represents 9% of the referrals made to the Criminal Court Clinic during 1980 and 1981.

Data for this report were obtained from records in the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic. These records include Probation Department investigations of defendants, records of examination interviews, and records of the court. Court records were further examined to obtain final dispositions of cases.

Demographic Data

Most of the women referred to the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic for evaluation during 1980 and 1981 were young, black, single, unemployed, and on public assistance. They came from families that were not intact. Many had a history of mental illness; most had a prior history of incarceration. The mean age of the group was 28.6 years, ranging from 16 to 61 years old. Nearly one quarter of the population was under 20 years old. Almost 65% of the total num-

ber of women were on bail or released on their own recognizance. This figure is particularly high in relation to the norm for this Forensic Psychiatry Clinic where in 1980 and 1981 the percentage of all referrals was 40% bailed defendants to 60% jailed defendants. Forty-three percent of the women in this study were under 30 years old and not incarcerated (see Table 1).

Black women made up nearly 70% of the group with the remainder divided between whites (17%) and hispanics (13%). This trend is somewhat more noticeable in the younger women in the study with blacks composing 83% of the women under 20 years old and 70% of the women between 20 and 29 years old. In all there were 36 black women under 30 (47% of the total population) (see Table 2).

For those women on whom educational data were available mean educational level attained was 10.6 years, median 10.9 years (Table 3). Sixty-five percent of the group did not complete high school or attain a General Education Degree (GED). This included 17 girls under 20 years old. Of the women over 20 on whom educational data could be obtained, 64% did not complete high school. Over 15% of the women had less than a ninth grade education. In all, 14% reported having some sort of college education, one women reported completing college and one woman was classified as illiterate.

Social Supports

In 68% of the reported cases the women came from families in which either one or both parents were missing. Five never knew either fathers or mothers and were raised in foster care or group homes; eight were raised by grandparents or other older relatives. Only 22 of these women have ever been married, and of these only seven marriages remain intact. Two women are widowed, eight are separated, and five are divorced. Of these last fifteen, three are now living in common-law relationships. Of the 54 women who stated that they had never been married, 8 are now living in common-law relationships. All of the women under 20 years old lived with their families. Of the 58 women over 20 years old 32 were reported to be in residential settings with other adults (parents, siblings, husbands, boyfriends, employers, and so forth), nine others lived with their own children. Only ten women lived in their own apartments without family support and only three of the group were undomiciled at the time of their arrests. The remaining two lived in supportive living situations related to their mental illness (see Table 4).

Employment and Income

Among the 74 women for whom employment data were available only 12% (nine women) reported being employed at the time of their arrests. All of the employed women were in the

TABLE 1—*Defendants' age by incarceration status.*

Age	Incarcerated	Bailed or ROR ^a	Total
Under 20 years	6 7.9%	12 15.8%	18 23.7%
20 to 29	9 11.8%	21 27.6%	30 39.4%
30 to 39	7 9.2%	7 9.2%	14 18.4%
40 to 49	5 6.6%	7 9.2%	12 15.8%
Over 50 years	0 0.0%	2 2.6%	2 2.6%
Total	27 35.5%	49 64.5%	76 100%

^aReleased on one's own recognizance.

TABLE 2—Defendants reported ethnicity.

Age	Black	White	Hispanic	Total
Under 20 years	15 19.7%	1 1.3%	2 2.6%	18 23.7%
20 to 29	21 27.6%	7 9.27%	2 2.6%	30 39.5%
30 to 39	8 10.5%	2 2.6%	4 5.3%	14 18.4%
40 to 49	8 10.5%	3 3.9%	1 1.3%	12 15.8%
Over 50 years	1 1.3%	0 0.0%	1 1.3%	2 2.6%
Total	53 69.7%	13 17.1%	10 13.2%	76 100%

TABLE 3—Defendants educational background (last year of school completed).^a

Age	8th Grade	9th to 11th Grade	GED or High School Graduate	Some College	Total
Under 20 years	3 4.2%	14 19.7%	0 0.0%	1 1.4%	18 25.4%
20 to 29	5 7.0%	12 16.9%	9 12.7%	4 5.6%	30 42.3%
30 to 39	1 1.4%	5 7.0%	2 2.8%	3 4.2%	11 15.5%
40 to 49	2 2.8%	3 4.2%	4 5.6%	2 2.8%	11 15.5%
Over 50 years	0 0.0%	1 1.4%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 1.4%
Total	11 15.5%	35 49.3%	15 21.1%	10 14.1%	71 ^b 100%

^aLast year of school completed does not include years begun but not finished. It represents the highest complete year of education attained.

^bNo data available in five cases.

TABLE 4—Prearrest residence by marital status.

Residential Status	Married	Single	Divorced	Separated	Widowed	Total
With parent or adult relative	0 0%	30 97%	0 0%	1 3%	0 0%	31 100%
With husband (common-law included)	7 39%	8 44%	1 6%	2 11%	0 0%	18 100%
With children	0 0%	6 67%	1 11%	1 11%	1 11%	9 100%
Alone	0 0%	4 44%	2 22%	2 22%	1 11%	9 100%
Supportive living	0 0%	1 50%	0 0%	1 50%	0 0%	2 100%
Undomiciled	0 0%	2 67%	0 0%	1 33%	0 0%	3 100%
Unknown/other	0 0%	3 75%	1 25%	0 0%	0 0%	4 100%
Total	7 9%	54 71%	5 7%	8 11%	2 3%	76 100%

20 years and over age group. Any employment including part-time, short-term, or summer jobs was counted in this variable. Another 45% reported having been previously employed at some time, an almost equal number (41%), primarily women under 30, reported never having worked at all (Table 5).

Of those who were not employed at the time of their arrests nine had no identifiable income source. Of the remaining 58, 26 (45%) reported that they or their entire family were supported by welfare, 11 (19%) were supported by Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and 14 (24%) were supported by employed family members or common-law husbands. Seven women including four adolescents who still lived with their families stated that criminal activity was their current principal means of income (Table 6).

Medical and Psychiatric Profile

By definition, referral to the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic for diagnostic evaluation implies some reason for the Court to suspect psychiatric disability. Nearly two thirds of the women in this sample have had some previous form of psychiatric treatment; most (79%) had been treated on an inpatient basis (see Table 7). Four women had been hospitalized following suicide attempts. Five had been treated for alcoholism or drug addiction. Twelve women could be clearly identified as having been patients at New York State Department of Mental Hygiene Institutions, seven of these on either a long-term basis or with multiple state hospital admissions. By age group, 35% of the women under 30 had been hospitalized at least

TABLE 5—*Defendants employment history.*

Age	Employed ^a	Formerly Employed ^b	Never Employed	Unknown
Under 20 years	0 0%	8 19%	10 42%	0 0%
20 to 29	3 33%	16 38%	10 42%	1 100%
30 to 39	1 11%	9 21%	4 17%	0 0%
40 to 49	5 56%	7 17%	0 0%	0 0%
Over 50 years	0 0%	2 5%	0 0%	0 0%
Total	9 100%	42 100%	24 100%	1 100%

^aAt time of arrest.

^bIncludes part time, temporary, and summer jobs.

TABLE 6—*Source of defendants income.*

	Number	Percent
Employment	9	12
Employed family members	14	18
"Welfare" ^a	26	34
SSI	11	15
Criminal activity	7	9
No information available	9	12
Total	76	100

^a"Welfare" is defined as any public assistance payment, either to the defendant or to the defendant's family, which is not clearly identified as SSI.

TABLE 7—History of psychiatric treatment by age.

Age	Number of defendants who reported				
	None or Unknown	Outpatient Treatment	Inpatient Treatment	Both	Total
Under 20 years	8 10.5%	3 3.9%	3 3.9%	4 5.3%	18 23.7%
20 to 29	16 21.1%	4 5.3%	2 2.6%	8 10.5%	30 39.5%
30 to 39	3 3.9%	3 3.9%	1 1.3%	7 9.2%	14 18.4%
40 to 49	1 1.3%	0 0.0%	5 6.6%	6 7.9%	12 15.8%
Over 50 years	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 1.3%	1 1.3%	2 2.6%
Total	28 36.8%	10 13.2%	12 15.8%	26 34.2%	76 100%

once, 14% had been treated as outpatients, and 75% of those over 30 had been inpatients of psychiatric hospitals, with another 10% receiving outpatient psychiatric treatment.

A large proportion of the women in the study (34% of those on this variable) were reported as being abusers of either alcohol, drugs, or both at the time of arrest or some time in the past. Note that data regarding alcohol and drug usage were to a large extent self-reported and therefore may be underreported. Any usage of any type was considered a positive including social drinking, as was any past usage even if current use was denied.

Staff of the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic provided psychiatric diagnoses under *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) III*, for all women evaluated for the Department of Probation and for women who were found not fit to proceed to trial because of mental disease or defect. A defendant may be found fit to proceed under legal criteria (understanding the charges and basic court procedures and being able to assist in their own defense) even if a diagnosable mental illness is present. In such circumstances no diagnosis is reported. Diagnoses were available for 51 of the women in this study (Table 8). Twenty-two women were either found fit to proceed or had their cases terminated at the Clinic before diagnosis could be reached. These women were coded as "Diagnosis Deferred" under DSM III. One woman was found

TABLE 8—Defendants DSM III diagnoses.

Diagnosis	Number	Percent	Adjusted Percentage
Conduct disorder (adolescent)	3	4.0	5.9
Anxiety disorder (adolescent)	1	1.3	2.0
Substance use disorders	7	9.2	13.7
Schizophrenic disorders	9	11.8	17.7
Other psychotic disorders	3	4.0	5.9
Affective disorders	1	1.3	2.0
Anxiety disorders	1	1.3	2.0
Impulse control disorders	2	2.6	3.9
Adjustment disorders	2	2.6	3.9
Personality disorders	22	29.0	43.1
Subtotal	51	67.1	100
No mental disorder	1	1.3	...
No diagnosis (Axis I or II)	2	2.6	...
Diagnosis deferred (Axis I or II)	22	29.0	...
Total	76	100	...

to have no diagnosable mental illness, but was described as having "Adult Antisocial Behavior." In two instances, no diagnosis was reported at all. Diagnostically one category of mental illness predominates among those women for whom the diagnosis was available. Over 42% of the women diagnosed were believed to have personality disorders. In addition three of the adolescents were classified in the comparable childhood and adolescence category of conduct disorders for a total of 48% of the population. The next largest category was schizophrenia with 19%.

Of the 24 women who were self-reported to have been alcoholics or drug abusers only seven were classified as currently having a primary diagnosis of substance abuse. The remaining diagnoses fell into the categories of anxiety disorders of adolescence (2%), anxiety disorders-adult (3%), psychoses (6%), impulse control (4%), adjustment disorders (4%), and affective disorders (2%) (Table 9). All 22 of the adult women who were diagnosed with personality disorders had been referred by the Department of Probation for examination to assist in the preparation of a Before Sentence Investigation Report. So were two of the adolescents with conduct disorders.

Criminal History

The Criminal Court of the City of New York is the court of original jurisdiction for criminal offenses. All incoming police cases are processed, assigned calendar (docket) numbers, and arraigned. Misdemeanor cases are adjudicated in the Criminal Court Parts. Felonies may be adjudicated here, or may be indicted and sent to the Supreme Court for consideration. Of the 76 women seen in the Criminal Court Clinic in 1980 and 1981, 33 (43%) were charged with misdemeanors and 43 (57%) with felony offenses. Of those charged with felonies, eight were later indicted. The charges of which these women were accused were murder/attempted murder (4), assault (2), sodomy (1), and arson (1). The remainder of the women in the population had their cases adjudicated in the Criminal Court.

Data regarding prior arrest record were obtained for all but two of the women surveyed. Of these over 75% had some prior history of criminal charges either as juveniles in Family Court, as adults, or both. Reports from the Court and from defendants themselves included crimes committed outside of New York State as well as local criminal behavior. In all, the 56 women with prior arrests were arrested a total of 334 times for an average of six times per woman. The range was from 14 women who had only one previous arrest each to one woman who had been charged 31 times prior to her present offense.

The offenses with which most of the women in this study were charged were larceny (18.4%), assault (17.1%), and arson (17.1%) (Table 10). Thirteen out of fourteen of the women accused of larceny were convicted of larceny. Eight out of thirteen women accused of

TABLE 9—*Subcategories of personality disorders and conduct disorders.*

Diagnosis	DSM III Classification	Frequency
Personality disorders (adult)		
Schizoid personality	301.20	4
Antisocial personality	301.70	5
Borderline personality	301.83	6
Passive-aggressive personality	301.84	6
Mixed type	301.89	1
Conduct disorders (adolescent)		
Under socialized, aggressive	312.00	1
Socialized, nonaggressive	312.21	1
Socialized, aggressive	312.23	1
Total	...	25

TABLE 10—Categories of defendants' offense.

Defendants Charged with	Defendants Convicted of												Dis-missed	Other PRWO ^a Pending	Not Fit Article 730	Sealed No In-formation	Total		
	120	125	130	140	145	150	155.25	155.00	160	165	205	240					Other	n	%
Assault (120)	8	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	13	17%
Homicide (125)	1	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	5	7%
Sex Offense (130)	...	3	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	5%
Burglary (140)	...	...	1	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	5%
Criminal mis-chief (145)	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	0	0%
Arson (150)	2	...	...	1	4	2	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	13	17%
Petit larceny (155.25)	...	...	...	...	...	...	9	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	9	12%
Grand larceny (155.00)	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	...	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	5	7%
Robbery (160)	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	6	8%
Stolen property (165)	...	...	...	...	...	...	6	...	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	7	9%
Child welfare (260)	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	1%
Weapons (265)	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	5%
Resisting arrest (205)	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	...	1	1%
Public order (240)	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3	4%
Other	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	1%
Total, n	12	1	3	2	5	2	24	1	0	2	1	4	0	2	1	4	2	76	100%
Total, %	16%	1%	4%	3%	7%	3%	32%	1%	0%	3%	1%	5%	0%	3%	1%	8%	3%	3%	...

^aPRWO = parole revoked, warrant ordered.

assault were convicted on that charge. Only two of thirteen suspected arsonists were convicted of arson. Twenty-four (32%) of the 76 women in the study were convicted of petit larceny, having been charged with petit larceny, grand larceny, robbery, criminal possession of stolen property, and burglary. The women charged with arson were convicted of arson (2), reckless endangerment (2), criminal trespass (1), and criminal mischief (4). Two of the arson cases are sealed, one is outstanding, and one was not competent to stand trial, case dismissed. Assault charges ranged from five women accused of felony assaults, seven of misdemeanor assaults, and one of reckless endangerment. Convictions were: felony assault (2), misdemeanor assault (5), reckless endangerment (1), harassment (1), disorderly conduct (1), and criminal possession of a weapon (1). One was not fit, case dismissed; one is still pending.

Criminal behavior is often classified for the sake of study into the categories of crimes against persons or crimes against property. In this study exactly 50% of the crimes had people as victims, (50%) were crimes against property. The crimes against persons category includes assault, manslaughter, sexual abuse, robbery, harassment, resisting arrest, and endangering the welfare of a child. The women in this study were more likely to commit felony offenses than misdemeanors. Of the 24 felony offenses against people the majority were committed against strangers (50%), 29% on acquaintances, and 21% on family members. Misdemeanors were more likely to have acquaintances as victims (57% of 14 cases) (Table 11).

Offenses against property are divided into those in which the property of others is affected (71%) and those in which one's own property is affected (29%). In offenses against the property of others misdemeanors predominate (20 out of 27) and are primarily for the charge of shoplifting (25%). Offenses against one's own property are exclusively for the felony offense of arson. Eleven out of thirteen cases fell into this classification.

Only one quarter of the women originally charged with felony offenses had been convicted of felonies. In all, 60 out of 76 women were convicted or pleaded guilty: 11 to felonies, 46 to misdemeanors, 2 to violations, and 1 to violating a section of the education law. Of the 60 women who were found guilty 50 were actually sentenced. Dispositions of the remaining 26 cases are detailed on Table 12.

Note that the small proportion of women found not guilty (13% case dismissed or sealed before conviction) is partly a function of the nature of the population. By definition referrals for presentence probation evaluations (66% of the total group) have already either pleaded guilty or been convicted. Two thirds of the original study group (50 women) received sentences for their criminal behavior. Of these 58% were sentenced to probation for either one year (7 cases), three years (21 cases), or five years (1 case). Two other women received combination sentences of two months in prison plus 34-months probation for a total of three years under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system. Five women were either given condi-

TABLE 11—*Type of offense by type of victim.*

Victim	Felony	Misdemeanor	Total
Person-stranger	12	4	16
	75%	25%	100%
Person-acquaintance	7	8	15
	47%	53%	100%
Person-family	5	2	7
	71%	29%	100%
Property-own	11	0	11
	100%	0%	100%
Property-others	7	20	27
	26%	74%	100%
Total	42	34	76
	55%	45%	100%

TABLE 12—Disposition of cases settled prior to conviction or sentencing.

Disposition	A— Before Conviction	B— Before Sentencing ^a
Case dismissed- generally	6	8
Case dismissed-Article 730-not fit	2	3
Case sealed	2	7
Parole revoked, warrant ordered	2	4
Case still pending- generally	2	2
Case still pending- not fit-Article 730	2	2
Total	16	26

^aColumn B is inclusive of Column A.

tional (3) or unconditional (2) discharges, two women were sentenced to time served, and twelve others served time in the prison system ranging from the low of 30 days to a high of three to nine years for the one woman convicted of manslaughter first degree. The average length of incarceration not including that woman was 5.8 months (Table 13).

Discussion and Summary

Analysis of the data presented above on the 76 women evaluated in the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic in 1980 and 1981 reveals several interesting matters for consideration.

Descriptively, the population is relatively young, with a predominance of ethnic minorities, a generally low educational level, and a dependence on public assistance.

Although a large proportion of the group (68%) came from broken homes, most of the women in the sample had some current social support systems that might be considered helpful in overcoming serious mental illness. In actuality, nearly two thirds had been previously identified as having a diagnosable mental illness, and most had received some form of

TABLE 13—Sentences imposed on defendants.

Sentence	Number	Percent	Adjusted Percent ^a
Discharged	5	6.6	10
Probation	29	38.2	58
Combined prison and probation	2	2.6	4
Prison:			
Time served	2	2.6	4
0 to 3 months	4	5.3	8
3 to 6 months	2	2.6	4
6 months to 1 year	5	6.6	10
More than 1 year	1	1.3	1
Subtotal	50	65.8	100
Pending as of 8/82	8	10.5	...
Dismissed	11	14.5	...
No information available	7	9.2	...
Total	76	100	...

^aPercentages of women actually receiving sentences.

psychiatric treatment. That so many of them (46% of the total population of 76 women) were diagnosed as currently suffering from chronic, long-term mental disorders (personality disorders and schizophrenia), in spite of a history of psychiatric treatment, may be a testimony to the inability of our mental health institutions to cope with personality disorders and chronic mental illnesses. It may also indicate some problems with the quality or quantity of social support that these women may be receiving.

Note that both the demographic data and the predominance of personality disorders and schizophrenia in this group are comparable to diagnoses of other subgroups of the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic population previously studied [2-4].

Economically, most of the women in the sample (57%) had been employed at some time in the past. However at present only 12% retained jobs. Further study of this data, specifically directed towards type of employment and length of time in position, could be informative in discussing the effects of employment and unemployment on criminality among these women.

The second objective of this study was to describe the types of crimes of which these women were accused, and to clarify if possible their interactions with the criminal justice system.

Although cases were referred from the Criminal Court, a large proportion (57%) of the women had been charged with felony offenses. These were then adjudicated primarily as lesser offenses, presumably through a plea bargaining process.

Many of the women in the sample were not incarcerated. This is different from the norm for the Forensic Psychiatry Clinic, and somewhat surprising given the high proportion (74%) of women who had prior arrest records.

In the category of crimes against persons, assault, robbery, manslaughter, and so on were more likely to have strangers as victims than family members. This was particularly true for the felony offenses. In the category of crimes against property, misdemeanors were committed against property of others, but the felony offense of arson was directed almost exclusively against the personal or family property of the individual.

Arson (17%), assault (17%), and petit larceny (12%) predominated among the charges of which these women were accused. Convictions were concentrated in the category of petit larceny (31%), a possible reflection of the large number of shoplifting cases (15), and other thefts which were plea bargained down to a lesser offense.

Most of the women received some form of punishment for their criminal behavior. The modal value for probation sentences was three years; mean incarceration, excluding the one woman sentenced for manslaughter, was just under six months.

The data presented in this study suggest many possible areas for further investigation. Closer analysis of the psychiatric histories of these women, with attention to lengths of stay and types of treatment might provide valuable information. Another study is contemplated to explore the nature of the crimes committed by these women, with particular attention to possible motivations for crimes such as arson that have the woman herself or her own family as the victim. Comparisons may be drawn to the population of women seen in the Supreme Court Clinic for supposedly more serious offenses during the same time period.

It is hoped that continued research into the problems of these highly troubled women will shed some light on the causes of their criminality. Perhaps they and others like them may be helped to direct their aggressive tendencies to a more constructive behavior pattern.

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