An Examination of Adult Female and Male Offending within the Context of Strain

Flavia Mandatori[1] and Chivon Fitch[#]

[1]The University of Tampa, Tampa, FL, USA
[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

The comparison of offending rates for males and females has received attention in the past few decades as part of the increasing interest in the narrowing of the gender gap in criminality. To extend previous gender-based research on criminal behavior, the current study is designed to examine gender differences in offending within the context of economic strain. Pearson's correlation and independent samples *t*-test analyses were computed to determine the impact of economic strain variables on male and female offending. Consistent with previous research, findings emphasized correlations between economic strains and male and female arrest trends, in addition to highlighting significant gender differences in the type and magnitude of strain experienced. The current study adds to the extant body of gender-focused strain scholarship by providing valuable insights into gender differences in economic-based and drug offending. Such research is essential to implement effective policies and guide future research.

Literature Review

Past scholarship consistently demonstrates that males offend significantly more than females (Lauritsen et al., 2009; Heimer, 2000; Mallicoat, 2019), yet little attention has focused on the extent to which females offend or the unique causes of female criminality. Although various risk factors have been identified in the literature on male offending, it is unclear whether similar risk factors apply to female offenders. Therefore, improving our understanding of female offenders, specifically in the context of strain, could increase the effectiveness of prevention and intervention initiatives.

To date, no known study has attempted to compare male and female economic-based offenses and drug abuse offending within the context of strain. In response, the current study was conducted to fill this gap in the contemporary literature. This study aims to analyze the variance in socioeconomic variables (i.e., unemployment, poverty, and income) related to offending trends for males and females, to determine gender-based differences in the type and magnitude of strain. Specifically, through Pearson's correlation and independent samples *t*-test analyses, the current study assesses gender-based differences in the effect of strain on burglary, robbery, larceny-theft, and drug abuse violation arrest trends.

Gender-focused Crime and the Gender Gap

It is widely recognized that violent offending rates in the United States have decreased in the past few decades (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019). Past scholarship has consistently focused on male criminality, aiming to identify causes, risk factors, and indicators of male criminal behavior (Akers et al., 2017; Lauritsen et al., 2009). Those studies that have considered gender differences have generally concluded that males engaged in criminal behavior more often than females (Heimer, 2000; Mallicoat, 2019), and female violent offenders constitute only a significantly small percentage of the offending population (Chesney-Lind, 1986; Isom Scott & Mikell, 2019). For this reason, the traditional male-focused approach of criminological research has failed to thoroughly examine female criminality in the context of

strain (Banarjee et al., 2015; Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003). Although males have higher rates of criminal activity overall, the rate of violent criminality among females has increased over the past few decades, prompting a more thorough consideration of such changes (Mallicoat, 2019; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996; Steffensmeier et al., 2006).

The comparison of offending rates for males and females has received attention in the past few decades as part of the increasing interest in the narrowing of the gender gap in criminality (Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Steffeinsmeier & Haynie, 2000). The main goal of gender-focused criminological research is to examine differences and similarities in offending and gendered causes of crime, which is essential to gain a deeper insight into the motivations that propel individuals to commit crimes. The extent to which the gender gap in offending is narrowing has been highly debated, resulting in divergent opinions about the driving causes of this phenomenon (Isom Scott & Mikell, 2019; Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Steffeinsmeier et al., 2006). For example, Steffeinsmeier, Zhong, Ackerman, Schwartz, and Agha (2006) conducted a gender-based longitudinal analysis of annual arrest rates to assess the increase in female arrests and the possible narrowing of the gender offending gap. Their analyses using Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) data demonstrated a significant increase in female offending rates, which resulted in the narrowing of the gender gap for criminal assault. However, the analysis of victimization data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) did not indicate that the gender gap was narrowing (Steffensmeier et al., 2006).

The gender gap is largest for violent crimes since females commit less violent offenses compared to males (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Chesney-Lind, 1986; Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Steffensmeier et al. (2006) suggest that trends among UCR and NCVS data support this assertion. Interestingly, scholars have found that the gender gap is consistently smaller for less serious crimes, claiming that the gap is less substantial for minor violent offenses than other types of offense (Lauritsen et al., 2009; Steffensmeier et al., 2006).

In contrast to Steffensmeier et al.'s (2006) findings, Lauritsen, Heimer, and Lynch (2009) found support for the hypothesis that the gender gap for violent crimes has been narrowing since the mid-1990s. Through a longitudinal analysis of the National Crime Survey (NCS) and NCVS data, Lauritsen et al. (2009) suggest that female-to-male robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault offending rates have increased over the years, causing the narrowing of the gender gap. However, scholars suggest that such results are more likely to be caused by a decrease in male violent offending rather than an increase in female violent offending (Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Lauritsen et al., 2009). Indeed, female violent offenders only constitute a very small portion of the criminal population (Chesney-Lind, 1986; Pollock & Davis, 2005). Despite the contrasting viewpoints regarding the criminal gender gap, gender differences in offending need to be thoroughly understood to identify the causes of male and female criminal behavior, as well as changes in the gender gap in offending.

Female Offending and Strain

Research on female offending has generally focused on identifying the characteristics of female offenders within the framework of general criminological theories, which were mainly developed to explain male criminal behavior (Isom Scott & Mikell, 2019). Yet, the literature fails to explore the motivations of females to engage in criminal behavior, and whether such motivations are consistent with those of male offenders. For instance, Koons-Witt and Schram (2003) utilized National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data to analyze the characteristics of female violent offending trends. By computing cross-tabulations of the characteristics of female offenders and the type of offense committed, the researchers found that females were more likely to engage in property crimes than violent or drug crimes. The majority of female offenders committed non-violent offenses that tended to reflect the offender's marginalized status in society (Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003). Koons-Witt & Schram's (2003) findings support the extant literature on female offending in that they are more likely to commit economic-based offenses such as petty theft, shoplifting, fraud, and embezzlement (Hunnicutt & Broidy, 2004; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000). Interestingly, while overall crime rates have been decreasing, female economic-based crime rates have been increasing over the past few decades (Hunnicutt & Broidy, 2004; Mallicoat, 2019). Such findings are particularly important to highlight the unique nature and extent of female criminality to thoroughly understand its causes.

In the context of explaining the propensity for female offending, several social factors such as poverty, strain, unemployment, and family disruption have been identified in the literature as playing a significant role (Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000). All the aforementioned factors constitute strains to the individual, which have been widely studied as potentially criminogenic factors. Agnew (1985) defined strain as the expression of frustration and anger resulting from the inability to achieve financial and social goals. As described in Agnew's (1985) work that led to the development of General Strain Theory (GST), strain can present itself in three major ways: the inability to achieve desired goals, the loss of a positive stimulus, or the presentation of a negative stimulus (Agnew & White, 1992; Ford, 2014; Kaufman, 2009). The first type of strain relates to structural influences on criminal behavior, such as socioeconomic conditions. The loss of positive stimuli refers to the removal of a positively valued resource, such as a family member. The third, the presentation of negative stimuli, refers to the addition of a negative event or influence, such as delinquent peers (Agnew, 1985; Ford, 2014; Teijón-Alcalá & Birkbeck, 2019). In the current study, the primary focus is on the first type of strain, as we are focusing on the influence of socioeconomic strains.

The extant scholarship has consistently shown that individuals feel pressure to achieve socially prescribed goals, such as financial success, which leads lower-class individuals to experience higher levels of strain (Akers et al., 2017; Merton, 1938). The disproportionate emphasis on social goals coupled with the failure to emphasize legitimate ways to achieve them can lead to criminal behavior (Akers et al., 2017; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Eitle, 2002; Merton, 1938; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). Consequently, as explained in Merton's (1938) social structure and anomie theory, individuals denied legitimate means to achieve goals are likely to resort to illegitimate means; thus, breaking the law. Merton (1938) explains the association between poverty and criminal behavior in terms of limited opportunities of vertical social mobility available to the individual. Therefore, individuals that experience higher levels of strain because of their inability to achieve social goals are more likely to engage in criminal behavior to meet societal expectations (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Jang, 2007; Merton, 1938; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). Given that females may experience economic strain differently than males, this is worth considering in terms of its relationship to offending.

Female Economic Marginalization

American culture deeply values the economic aspect of its institutional structure (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). Consequently, individuals with low socioeconomic status are exposed to higher levels of vulnerability resulting from societal pressure to achieve financial wealth (Akers et al., 2017; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). Research that explores the relationship between gender and strain demonstrates that structural disadvantage associated with limited economic opportunities affects both males and females in similar ways (Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000). However, gender inequality yields significant differences in the wage gap, highlighting males' economic advantage as well as females' economic disadvantage in modern society (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008). Although the gender wage gap had been consistently narrowing until the 1980s, it has remained fairly stable ever since (Blau & Kahn, 2017). According to the U.S Bureau of Labor, the gap in median annual earnings of males and females is still significant (Women's Bureau, 2018). The discrimination that females have to face in the labor market continues to penalize them, perpetuating gender-based economic inequality (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Blau & Kahn, 2017). For instance, Broidy and Agnew (1997) suggest that females tend to be funneled towards pink-collar jobs with low wages, as a result of gender discrimination. Examples include part-time jobs and work in service industries (Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008). We contend that financial stress contributes to female offending, which may explain increasing rates of female property crimes (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Lauritsen et al., 2009; Simpson, 1991). Therefore, the gender-based discrimination that females tend to experience enhances the likelihood of being exposed to gender-specific strain, which is related to monetary-based and violent crime rates (Eitle, 2002).

According to the economic marginalization hypothesis, females who experience economic disadvantage are more likely to engage in criminal behavior (Akers et al., 2017; Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). The 'typical' female offender often lives in poverty, is uneducated, unemployed or underemployed, and lacks legitimate means to improve her economic situation (Akers et al., 2017; Box & Hale, 1984; Hunnicutt & Broidy, 2004;

Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003). The economic pressure caused by the aforementioned factors, in addition to low prestige in work roles and social restrictions on behavior, increases females' level of discrimination in society relative to males, which in turn influences crime rates (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Hunnicutt & Broidy, 2004; Kaufman, 2009). Based on the economic marginalization hypothesis, then, the economic disadvantage of females as compared to males may be one cause of the narrowing of the gender gap in criminality (Heimer, 2000).

For instance, Hunnicutt and Broidy (2004) conducted a cross-national longitudinal study that investigated the relationship between male and female economic marginalization and conviction rates from the United Nations World Surveys on crime trends. The authors found that economic marginalization and female conviction rates are correlated, highlighting the importance of the financial component to female offending (Hunnicutt and Broidy, 2004). Similarly, Reckdenwald and Parker's (2008) study examined the relationship between female robbery and drug sale involvement as it related to female economic marginalization and gender inequality. They compared the rates of robbery and drug arrests in the context of socioeconomic variables such as female poverty, unemployment, female-headed households, and median income. Reckdenwald and Parker (2008) found that economic marginalization is a robust predictor of female criminality and that economically marginalized females are more likely to commit monetary-based crimes out of necessity. Based on their findings, we felt it was worth broadening the examination of socioeconomic indicators as they relate to economic offenses.

Gender-focused General Strain Theory

Previous studies have demonstrated that financial strain deeply affects human behavior, to the extent that it enhances the likelihood of an individual engaging in criminal behavior (Agnew, 1985; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Ford, 2014; Kaufman, 2009; Slocum et al., 2005). For instance, Slocum, Simpson, and Smith (2005) analyzed the effects of strain on the offending patterns of a sample of incarcerated females. Their findings demonstrate that increased levels of strain were correlated with an increased likelihood of engaging in violent and non-violent offending, as well as drug use. Although Agnew's (1985) strain theory has been widely tested, most of the literature that applied this framework has been conducted on male subjects, since the percentage of female offenders is significantly lower than that of male offenders (Chesney-Lind, 1986; Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Pollock & Davis, 2005). While there is limited research on this matter, an examination of gender-specific strains could contribute to our current understanding of female criminality.

The existing literature on gender-focused strain provides contrasting viewpoints regarding the effects of strains on males and females. Steffeinsmeier and Haynie (2000) conducted a study to examine the influence of economic strains on male and female arrests for the crimes of homicide, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and larceny. By computing seemingly unrelated regression analyses, the authors found that the effects of macrosocial variables on female offending rates are similar to those on male offending rates, suggesting that strain theory can be applied to female offenders. Indeed, variables such as poverty, unemployment, and income inequality, have been shown to influence female offending rates and have been used as indicators of structural disadvantage (Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000). However, Steffensmeier and Haynie's (2000) study demonstrated that the effect of strain variables on offending rates tended to be more powerful for males than females. Explanations for such phenomenon include a greater emphasis on monetary success for males as compared to females, which increases the level of pressure experienced by males to achieve goals and the fact that males are more likely to resort to criminal acts in response to increased frustration (Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000).

On a similar note, Broidy and Agnew's (1997) research expanded the scope of exploration on gendered strain by adapting Agnew's (1985) General Strain Theory. Their gendered general strain theory posits that there are significant differences in the way males and females experience strain, and these differences can explain the gender gap in criminality. Interestingly, Broidy and Agnew's (1997) work supports the notion that females experience as much or even more strain than males but contended that the difference in the amount of strain experienced cannot thoroughly explain the gender gap in offending (Eitle, 2002). Indeed, studies have established that males and females also tend to

experience different types of strain (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Kaufman, 2009). For instance, females are more likely to be subjected to behavioral restrictions, social control, and greater exposure to specific types of victimization (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Kaufman, 2009). Males are more likely to be vulnerable to financial stress, victimization for the majority of crimes, and issues between peers (Kaufman, 2009).

Not only are males and females subjected to different types of strain, but they also differ in their response to it. Past scholarship demonstrates support for gender differences concerning preferred coping mechanisms for serious strain (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Isom-Scott & Mikell, 2019; Kaufman, 2009). Although males are more likely to express anger resulting from strain through criminal behavior, females may respond to strain with feelings of guilt, anxiety, or depression (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Kaufman, 2009; Turner et al., 1995). Males generally tend to externalize strain while females tend to internalize it, reducing their likelihood of coping through criminal acts (De Coster & Zito, 2010; Hoffman & Su, 1997; Isom-Scott & Mikell, 2019). Males tend to use violence or deviance as a coping mechanism, whereas females are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors such as drug use (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). For example, Agnew and White (1992) examined the extent to which strains, such as negative life events, parental fighting, and occupational strain, account for juvenile drug abuse and found a positive correlation between strain and drug use among adolescents. Their analyses establish that drug use is predominantly a response to the negative outcomes caused by strain. For this very reason, General Strain Theory could also provide insight into the relationship between strain variables and drug abuse violation crimes.

It is important to note that individuals who lack coping skills and resources, such as reduced social skills and low self-efficacy, are more likely to resort to deviant behaviors (Agnew, 2006). For instance, Isom Scott and Mikell (2019) examined the effect of financial strain, negative emotions, self-control, self-esteem, and positive coping skills on deviant behaviors and drug and alcohol offenses in a sample of female undergraduate students. The conditioning variable consisted of the level of gender socialization, that is, feminine, masculine, androgynous, or undifferentiated. Statistical analyses of ANOVA and multivariate regressions demonstrate that social and financial strains were positively correlated with drug and alcohol offenses. Interestingly, positive coping skills and the level of self-esteem were not statistically significant in explaining criminal behavior. Isom Scott and Mikell's (2019) findings demonstrate that gender socialization conditions one's experience of and response to strain. As demonstrated, one's level of femininity or masculinity conditioned the associations between strains and drug and alcohol offending (Isom Scott & Mikell, 2019). Such findings are extremely important as they emphasize gender differences related to strain, which in turn could explain gender differences in offending.

The Current Study

Using UCR arrest data for the crimes of burglary, robbery, larceny-theft, and drug abuse violations, the current study is designed to extend previous research by examining gender differences in offending within the context of strain to answer the following research questions:
How do economic strains (i.e., unemployment, poverty, and income) relate to
burglary, robbery, and larceny arrests for males and females?
How do economic strains (i.e., unemployment, poverty, and income) relate to drug
abuse violation arrests for males and females?
(3) How do strain variables differ for males and females?

For the first research question, we hypothesize that economic strains are positively associated with burglary, robbery, and larceny arrests for both males and females. As past scholarship noted, strain is a robust correlate of economic-based crimes (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Jang, 2007; Merton, 1938; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994; Steffensmeier & Hayne, 2000). Lower-class individuals who are denied legitimate opportunities to achieve financial and social goals are more likely to experience higher levels of strain, which may lead to antisocial and criminal behavior (Akers et al., 2017; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Eitle, 2002; Merton, 1938; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994).

For the second research question, we also hypothesize that economic strains would be positively associated with drug abuse violation arrests for both males and females. The literature emphasizes that drug abuse is predominantly a response to the negative outcomes caused by increased levels of social and financial strains (Agnew & White, 1992; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Isom Scott & Mikell, 2019; Slocum et al., 2005). Thus, we assert that our findings will support past scholarship.

For the third research question, we expect to see gender differences in the magnitude of socioeconomic strain experienced by males and females. The literature emphasizes that males and females are subjected to different types of strain and differ in their response to it (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; De Coster & Zito, 2010; Isom-Scott & Mikell, 2019; Kaufman, 2009). Males are more likely to express anger resulting from strain through violent criminal behavior, while females are more likely to respond to strain by engaging in self-destructive behaviors such as drug use (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Kaufman, 2009; Turner et al., 1995). We anticipate that socioeconomic strains will be different for males and females.

Specifically, we are concerned with how the influence of strain, such as socioeconomic status, is related to female and male offending. In an attempt to address this question, we utilize measures of annual arrests for the crimes of burglary, robbery, larceny-theft, and drug abuse violations. The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects that socioeconomic variables of unemployment, poverty, and mean income have on offending trends of males and females, to detect gender-based differences in the type and magnitude of strain.

Methods

Data

In the current study, we utilized official arrest data by gender for the crimes of burglary, robbery, larceny-theft, and drug abuse violations, which were gathered from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program. The data consist of the number of males and females arrested nationwide for each of the aforementioned crimes annually. These data only reflect crimes that were reported to law enforcement agencies that report to the UCR. Law enforcement agencies that participate in the UCR Program submit 12 months of crime data for a given year. In the current study, all data were gathered from 1995 to 2018 to conduct a trend analysis of the influence of economic strain variables as they vary with arrest rates. Official crime data are well suited for this analysis as they provide a nationally representative overview of fluctuations in annual crime rates. Furthermore, it allows for the comparison of offending between males and females.

As far as economic strain variables are concerned, the number of males and females that were unemployed and the number living below the poverty line were collected annually using the same time frame as the UCR data collected for the current study. We also included a measure of average income for males and females annually. These variables were selected since they are good indicators of financial strains to determine how they relate to monetary-based and drug crime rates. Annual unemployment data were gathered from the Current Population Survey (CPS) from 1995 to 2018. The sample of this survey consists of 60,000 households and is representative of the general population due to the large sample size and broad population coverage (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Therefore, it provides reliable data on unemployment.

Poverty and income data by sex were gathered from the United States Census Bureau from 1995 to 2018. Annual poverty and income estimates were derived from the Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC; United States Census Bureau, 2020a). The sample consists of more than 75,000 households that are surveyed about family income and family composition and is representative of the general population (United States Census Bureau, 2020b).

Measures

The variables in the current study include the number of persons arrested for burglary, robbery, larceny-theft, and drug abuse violations. Data regarding annual arrests by sex were gathered from the UCR (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1995–2018). The measures of economic strain consisted of the annual number of males and females that are unemployed, live below the poverty threshold, and mean income, from 1995 to 2018. For both unemployment and poverty data, annual estimates were given in numbers of thousands. All data were separated by sex to allow for the comparison of strain effects on males and females crime rates. The authors have acknowledged the importance of a comparative analysis on gender and criminal behavior. However, for the purpose of data gathering, gender data was not available. Therefore, this comparative examination is purely based upon sex differences in criminal offending.

Dependent Variables

In the current study, we considered four dependent variables: arrests for burglary, robbery, larceny-theft, and drug abuse violations (from 1995 to 2018).

Burglary Arrests. The measure of burglary arrests consists of the total number of arrests for the crime of burglary in a given year in the United States. Burglary is defined as the unlawful breaking or entering of a structure with the intent to commit a felony or theft. Annual data on burglary arrests were gathered from 1995 to 2018 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1995–2018).

Robbery Arrests. The measure of robbery arrests consists of the total number of arrests for robbery in a given year in the United States. Robbery is defined as the taking or attempting to take any item of value from the care, custody, or control of an individual through the use of force, threat of force or violence, or by instilling fear. Annual data on robbery arrests were gathered from 1995 to 2018 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1995–2018).

Larceny-theft Arrests. The measure of larceny-theft arrests consists of the total number of arrests for larceny-theft in a given year in the United States. Larceny-theft is defined as the unlawful carrying or leading of personal property from the possession of an individual without resorting to force, violence, threat, or fraud (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1995–2018). Larceny-theft crimes include shoplifting, pocket-picking, and theft of any item. Annual data on larceny-theft arrests were gathered from 1995 to 2018.

Drug Abuse Violation Arrests. The measure of drug abuse violation arrests consists of the total number of arrests for drug abuse violations in a given year in the United States. Drug abuse violations consist of violating laws that forbid the production, distribution, and use of specific controlled substances (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1995–2018). The categories of drugs include derivatives of cocaine and opium, marijuana, synthetic narcotics, and non-narcotic drugs. Annual data on drug abuse violation arrests were gathered from 1995 to 2018.

Independent Variables

In the current study, the independent variables consisted of strains such as unemployment, poverty, and mean income.
Unemployment. The measure of unemployment consists of the total number of jobless males and females, currently available for work, and looking for employment in the United States (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Unemployment data by sex were gathered from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics through the Current Population Survey (CPS) from 1995 to 2018. The main goal of the CPS is to measure the number of unemployed males and females in the country (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Only the civilian non-institutionalized population aged 16 or older is surveyed, hence individuals in institutions such as prisons, nursing facilities, and long-term care hospitals are ineligible (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Participants are interviewed monthly by trained experts that determine whether individuals are employed, unemployed, or are not part of the labor force (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

     Poverty. The United States Census Bureau computes poverty by comparing a family's total income to official poverty thresholds. Annual poverty estimates were derived from the Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC; United States Census Bureau, 2020a). Participants are required to answer detailed questions about their social and economic characteristics, in addition to those of each member of the familial unit (United States Census Bureau, 2020b). The poverty threshold refers to the minimum amount of dollars that a person or a familial unit requires to meet their basic needs (United States Census Bureau, 2020b). Poverty thresholds may change depending upon the age composition and size of the family, and the same thresholds are used nationwide. Depending on the composition of the family, the U.S. Census Bureau assigns one out of 48 poverty thresholds (United States Census Bureau, 2020b). For instance, poverty thresholds in 2018 ranged from $12,784 to $55,140 depending on the size of the family unit and the number of related children under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Thresholds are updated each year to account for inflation (United States Census Bureau, 2020b). If a household's total income is less than the respective threshold, the family is considered to live in poverty. Annual poverty data reporting the number of people living below the poverty line were gathered from 1995 to 2018.

     Mean Income. The measure of mean income consists of the amount of dollars that persons aged 15 years or older earned in the previous calendar year, excluding noncash benefits and capital gains (CPS; Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2020c). Annual mean income estimates were derived from the Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) from 1995 to 2018 (United States Census Bureau, 2020a). The sample of the survey consisted of households, which refer to all the persons occupying a housing unit (CPS; Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2020c). The person designated as the householder reported the income of every member of the housing unit. The income of every member of the familial unit is computed from more than 50 sources of income, which include wages and salaries, trusts, rents, and dividends (United States Census Bureau, 2020b). The mean income data report the annual mean income of every individual in the sample of households surveyed. For the purpose of this study, income data utilized were separated by gender, included all races, and were reported in current U.S. dollars.

Analytical Strategy

To determine the impact of economic strain variables on male and female offending, the authors computed descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and independent samples *t*-test analyses. Specifically, we investigated the relationship between male economic strain variables and male offending, and the relationship between female economic strain variables and female offending. Independent samples *t*-tests were also utilized to determine whether the economic strains and offenses were statistically significantly different for males and females.

Results

Descriptive statistics including the mean, standard deviation, and range of each measure by sex are reported in Table 1. Male arrests for each category of crime were consistently higher as compared to female arrests, which is consistent with prior studies (Isom Scott & Mikell, 2019; Kaufman, 2009; Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003). The mean number of unemployed males was greater than unemployed females, but the mean number of females living below the poverty line was greater than males. Furthermore, there were differences in male and female mean income, such that the mean income for females was lower than for males, supporting the female economic marginalization thesis (Hunnicutt & Broidy, 2004; Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008) However, for each variable, large ranges and standard deviations indicated significant variation within the sample, so these differences must be interpreted with caution.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	*M*	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum
Criminal Arrests	177864	35722	109250	259882
Male Burglary	30558	3765	22571	36035
Female Burglary	75517	16067	57212	124942
Male Robbery	9871	1596	7294	12869
Female Robbery	547970	87527	396062	776902
Male Larceny-theft	354622	59651	280976	463508
Female Larceny-theft	966026	80204	829460	1125138
Male Drug Abuse Violations	234706	38536	177542	309691
Female Drug Abuse Violations				
	4749125	1638759	2975000	8626000
Economic Strain Variables	3901583	1076156	2717000	6199000
Male Unemployment	17071792	2324423	13536000	20893000
Female Unemployment	21898583	2529280	18045000	25975000
Male Poverty	57784	2433	52563	62300
Female Poverty				
Male Mean Income				
Female Mean Income	34712	2747	28852	40524

To determine the relationship between the economic indicators and offending, we analyzed the data to determine the extent to which the variables were associated. Results from the Pearson correlation analysis for males and females are reported in Tables 2 and Table 3, respectively. To identify the unique associations among our variables for male and female offenders, we separated the correlation analyses (which address the first research question: how do economic strains relate to burglary, robbery, and larceny arrests for males and females?). Correlation results indicated that mean income was negatively correlated with male burglary (r (22) = -.86, $p < .01$), robbery (r (22) = -.77, $p < .01$), and larceny-theft (r (22) = -.90, $p < .01$) arrests; thus, as income increased, burglary and larceny arrests decreased. Unemployment and poverty were not significantly associated with male offending. Correlation coefficients for unemployment were positively correlated and weak for all crimes, and those for poverty were negatively correlated and weak. For male burglary, robbery, and larceny-theft, the associations were positively correlated and weak for drug abuse violations. On the other hand, poverty was positively correlated with female burglary (r (22) = .76, $p < .01$), robbery (r (22) = .54, $p < .01$), and larceny-theft (r (22) = .83, $p < .01$). Unemployment was positively correlated with burglary (r (22) = .71, $p < .01$) and larceny-theft (r (22) = .82, $p < .01$) arrests among females.

Correlation results also provided answers to the second research question: How do economic strains (i.e., unemployment, poverty, and income) relate to drug abuse violation arrests for males and females? The economic strain variables utilized in this study were not significantly correlated with male drug abuse violation arrests. However, female drug abuse violation arrests were positively correlated with both poverty (r (22) = .53, $p < .01$) and mean income (r (22) = .89, $p < .01$).

Correlation findings provide empirical evidence that economic strains correlate with both male and female offending. Moreover, there are significant gender differences in the relationship between strains and male and female

offending. For instance, mean income was the only statistically significant strain variable correlated with male offending, whereas poverty and unemployment were statistically significantly associated with strain and female offending. Furthermore, strain variables were not correlated with male drug offending, whereas both poverty and mean income were correlated with female drug offending. The varying association between economic indicators and offending highlights the importance of exploring the influence of potentially unique strain sources for males and females, as well as examining multiple types of offending.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Male Study Variables

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Burglary Arrests	24	177864	35722	—						
Robbery Arrests	24	75517	16067	.899**	—					
Larceny/theft Arrests	24	547970	87527	.911**	.876**	—				
Drug Abuse Violations	24	966026	80204	.221	.284	-.008	—			
Unemployment	24	4749125	1638759	.142	.031	.132	.294	—		
Poverty	24	17071792	2324423	-.141	-.143	-.020	.253	.825**	—	
Mean Income	24	57784	2433	-.857**	-.772**	-.904**	-.109	-.421*	-.203	—

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. ****p < .0001.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Female Study Variables

Variable	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Burglary Arrests	24	30558	3765	—						
Robbery Arrests	24	9871	1596	.745**	—					
Larceny/theft Arrests	24	354622	59651	.887**	.677**	—				
Drug Abuse Violations	24	234706	38536	.293	.379	.125	—			
Unemployment	24	3901583	1076156	.713**	.338	.819*	.192	—		
Poverty	24	21898583	2529280	.764**	.540**	.829**	.528**	.835**	—	
Mean Income	24	34712	2747	.060	.064	-.089	.886**	.344	.096	—

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. ****p < .0001.

To answer the third and final research question: How do strain variables differ for males and females? Results from the independent samples t-test analyses are reported in Table 4. The results of the t-test analysis indicate that there were statistically significant mean differences in economic strains and offending between males and females. On average, male offending was significantly higher than females for every crime, which is consistent with the extant scholarship. Economic strain variables of unemployment (t (23) = 2.12, p = .040), poverty (t (23) = -2.07, p = .044), and mean income (t (23) = 30.80, p < .001) were all statistically significant for males and females. Males scored significantly higher in unemployment and poverty, whereas mean income comparisons indicate that females reported significantly lower income compared to males.

The results of the independent samples t-test analysis demonstrate that economic strain variables differ for males and females. A significantly higher number of males reported being unemployed, whereas a higher number of females reported living in poverty. On average females reported a significantly lower income compared to males. Again, the results highlighted notable gender differences in the experience of strain related to offending.

Table 4: Independent samples *t*-tests for male and female study variables

Gender	Male		Female		*t*(46)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Burglary	177864	35722	30558	3765	20.090	.000
Robbery	75517	16067	9871	1596	19.919	.000
Larceny-theft	547970	87527	354622	59651	5.742	.000
Drug Abuse Violation	966026	80204	234706	38536	17.632	.000
Unemployment	4749125	1638759	3901583	1076156	2.118	.040
Poverty	17071792	2324423	21898583	2529280	-2.071	.044
Mean Income	57784	2433	34712	2747	30.804	.000

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine how the influence of economic strains, such as unemployment, poverty, and mean income, affect female and male offending. Official arrest data from the UCR were analyzed to determine patterns of relationships between economic strains and burglary, robbery, larceny, and drug abuse violation arrests for males and females. The results from correlation and independent samples *t*-test analyses emphasize the relationships between economic strains and male and female arrest trends, in addition to highlighting significant gender differences in the type and magnitude of strain experienced. The current study adds to the extant body of gender-focused strain scholarship by providing valuable insights into gender differences in economic-based and drug offending. Such research is essential to implement effective policies and guide future research.

Previous studies have highlighted robust correlates of strain with both male and female offending (Agnew, 1985; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Eitle, 2002; Kaufman, 2009; Slocum et al., 2005; Steffensmeier & Hayne, 2000). Results from the current study support the notion that individuals exposed to higher levels of strain due to their inability to achieve social goals may be more likely to engage in criminal behavior (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Jang, 2007; Lauritsen et al., 2009; Merton, 1938; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994; Simpson, 1991). The results of the current study can be explained in the context of Merton's (1938) social structure and anomie theory; those denied institutional means to achieve goals are likely to resort to illegitimate means (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Jang, 2007; Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). Merton (1938) also explained the association between poverty and criminal behavior in terms of restricted opportunities for vertical social mobility. Furthermore, Agnew's (1985) General Strain Theory posits that the inability to achieve desired goals relates to social structure and anomie theories of criminal behavior (Agnew & White, 1992; Kaufman, 2009). Interestingly, the current findings only support this association for female offending, since male poverty was not significantly correlated with arrest trends. Therefore, the relationship between strains and economic-based offending of males and females may be explained in terms of structural disadvantage, which pushes individuals to engage in criminal behavior in an attempt to improve their condition.

Regarding the second research question, the current findings partially support prior research regarding the relationship between economic strains and drug abuse. Previous research points out that strain measures such as negative life events, parental fighting, and occupational strain may influence drug abuse (Agnew & White, 1992; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Ford, 2014; Isom Scott & Mikell, 2019). Consequently, we expected to observe correlations between economic strains and drug abuse violation arrests for both males and females. However, in the current study no statistically significant relationship between economic strains and drug offending was detected for males. It is plausible that other types of strains may have a greater impact on drug abuse for males. For instance, Ford's (2014) assessment of the influences of strain on substance abuse demonstrated that poor health, an understudied category of strain, is

directly related to heavy drinking, marijuana use, and prescription drug misuse in a sample of adults. Ford's (2014) findings explain drug abuse within the context of Agnew's (1985) General Strain Theory, emphasizing that health strain may be more influential on drug abuse arrests than other types of economic strain. Therefore, a broader analysis of male drug offending within the context of strain is needed to expand the current body of research.

The current findings support the relationship between female economic strains and drug abuse violation arrests. Both poverty and mean income were positively correlated with drug offending, emphasizing that economic strains are more significant for females than males as far as drug offenses are concerned. The discrepancy between male and female findings may be explained in terms of gender differences in the experience of and response to strain (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Ford, 2014; Isom-Scott & Mikell, 2019; Kaufman, 2009). While males are more likely externalize strain through violence and deviant behavior, females are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors such as drug use (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; De Coster & Zito, 2010; Hoffman & Su, 1997; Isom-Scott & Mikell, 2019). The significant differences in coping mechanisms of males and females highlight the need for a comprehensive examination of the influence of strain upon drug abuse, as to implement effective policies to address this prominent social issue.

The gender-focused approach adopted in the current study allows for a comparison of the influence of economic strains on males and females. Findings highlighted that the types and magnitude of strain experienced by males and females affect the relationship with offending differently. Previous studies provide contrasting viewpoints regarding the gendered effects of strains. Although structural disadvantage associated with limited economic opportunities affects both males and females (Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000), females may experience higher levels of social discrimination due to gender-based economic inequality (Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Blau & Kahn, 2017). According to the female economic marginalization perspective, females who experience economic disadvantage are more likely to engage in criminal behavior due to the lack of legitimate means to improve their economic situation (Akers et al., 2017; Box & Hale, 1984; Eitle, 2002; Hunnicutt & Broidy, 2004; Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Reckdenwald & Parker, 2008; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Therefore, the current findings add to the extant scholarship regarding the effects of strains upon male and females offending, by providing a unique insight into the important gender differences in the experience of and reaction to strain as a robust correlate of economic-based and drug offending.

Limitations

Despite the relevance of findings of this research, there are important limitations to consider. First, the study was not intended to establish causality. Like most research in the field of criminology, the design and analytical plan of this study can only establish correlation between economic strains and male and female offending. When analyzing macro-level variables such as unemployment, poverty, and mean income, an experimental design to establish causation is not feasible. For this very reason, it is important to acknowledge that individual-level confounding variables, such as self-control and biosocial factors, were not included in the current analysis.

Second, although the large-scale measures of economic strain were nationally representative, specific subgroups of the population were excluded. Juveniles, as well as institutionalized individuals in jails and prisons, nursing homes, and long-term care hospitals were excluded from surveys utilized in measures. For this very reason, findings cannot be generalized to these specific segments of the population. This exclusion may hinder the validity of findings, since reliable economic data regarding inmates who have been arrested for economic-based and drug crimes could have provided a valuable insight into the effects of strain on criminal arrests.

As far as UCR arrest data is concerned, there are several limitations that reduce the validity of the current findings. First and foremost, due to the hierarchy rule, a significant portion of criminal acts may not be reported in official arrest data. In multiple-offense situations, only the most serious Part I offense is to be scored (Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook, 2004). Consequently, official crime data provide limited data regarding the actual number of persons arrested for a specific offense. Second, official arrest data report the total annual number of arrests for each

crime, without providing information regarding the actual number of persons arrested. Therefore, there may be individuals that are arrested more than once for the same crime in a given year, which could not be taken into consideration in the current study. Third, the UCR does not account for the number of unreported crimes, referred to as the dark figure of crime, which results in an underestimate of the impact of economic strains on crime.

Implications for Research and Practice

The current findings provide support for the relationship between economic strains and male and female monetary-based and drug offending. Economic strains were shown to correlate with offending trends, and significant gender differences arose in the analysis of the experience of and reaction to strain. Although males have significantly higher rates of offending, it is essential to explore criminogenic factors that may push females to engage in criminal behavior to gain a better insight into gendered strain (Heimer, 2000; Koons-Witt & Schram, 2003; Mallicoat, 2019; Pollock & Davis, 2005). Gender-focused research is essential to thoroughly understand how strain influences males and females differently, as to implement effective strategies to minimize the exposure to strains and ultimately reduce offending rates.

The findings from the current study provide support for the influence of economic strains upon criminal behavior. However, as Agnew (1985) posited, strain can present itself in three major ways: the inability to achieve desired goals, the loss of a positive stimulus, or the presentation of a negative stimulus (Agnew & White, 1992; Ford, 2014; Kaufman, 2009). While this study only focused upon the first type of strain, future gender-focused research should aim to investigate the effects of other types of strain on criminal behavior. Having established that male and female offending is affected by the influence and magnitude of strain in different ways, gaining a thorough understanding of what factors are more predominant may have a significant impact on the effectiveness of policies aimed at eradicating criminal behavior.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the focus of the current study pertained economic-based and drug offending only. Yet, a gender-focused approach to examine the effect of strains upon additional categories of offending, such as violent, personal, and financial crimes, could add to extant scholarships and further expand the current understanding of economic strain upon criminal behavior. Moreover, the impact of intra-individual factors on offending should be further investigated within the context of strain, as to identify the extent to which micro-level variables could account for criminal behavior. Mediating variables such as one's level of education, health status, gender socialization, and self-control should also be thoroughly analyzed to provide a better insight into the intertwining of macro-level and individual factors in explaining male and female offending within the context of strain.

In conclusion, the findings of the current study provide support for a gendered general strain theory of criminal behavior. Economic strains were shown to influence the relationship between strain and offending for both males and females. Moreover, findings highlighted gender differences in the type and magnitude of economic strain experienced by males and females, which prompts for a continuing gender-focused approach to gain a better understanding of the significant gender differences in offending, as well as an increased emphasis upon female criminality overall.

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