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FEMALE CRIMINALITY IN OMAHA¹

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Sex plays an increasing role in crime, but the differentiation of the sexes in criminality is gradually decreasing since the social and economic equality of the sexes has become more parallel. In other words, crime committed by women is on the increase as this study shows. This is particularly marked in urban centers. The culture patterns of the rural areas are greatly retarded in respect to sex equality. The ratio of crime among women to that of man in the urban areas is about three times as great as in rural. In general, recidivism among women is much less than with men. "The variations in the ratio of female to male delinquents indicate that the ratio is not determined by sex differences as such, but is affected by many social elements, such as conditions of life and training, codes of behavior and ideals." There may be a tendency for juries and judges to be more sympathetic towards accused women. It is difficult to ascertain the number of women who may be criminal "powers behind the thrones." The male partner in crime is thus detected while the woman's behavior is very seldom questioned.

This article is a brief analysis of data secured from a study of female arrests as recorded by the Omaha police from 1930 to 1934 inclusive. The occupation, the race, offense and disposition of the cases were noted. During this period, 9277 women were arrested. In analyzing the distribution of arrests during these five years, we find that the year 1930 was the lowest in number of arrests, having 1,321, or 14.1 percent, of the five years' arrests. In 1931, the arrests increased to 2,090, or 22.2 per cent, of the grand total. Then there was a drop in 1932, followed by another decrease in 1933, which had a total of 1,830 arrests. The percentage for this year was 19.7, or a decrease from 1931 of 2.5 per cent. We find, too, that 1930 and 1933 are the two low years for arrests during the period of this study.

However, this decrease which seemed encouraging in 1933, proved to be rather misleading, and in 1934 the total arrests soared to a new high mark of 2,101, or 23.0 per cent of the arrests made

¹ The author is indebted to Miss Honora Swiger for valuable research assistance in the preparation of this article.

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during the five years. This shows that arrests in 1934 increased 3.3 per cent over those of 1933 and 10.0 per cent over those of 1930, showing a very definite trend.

The monthly distribution of these cases is interesting in that it follows the generally known fact that crimes against person occur most often in the summer months. Climatic conditions and changes seem to have a great influence on women's behavior. From a table of months' totals of arrests we find that in general the greatest number of arrests occurred during the summer months of these five years.³

March of 1930 had the lowest number of arrests of all the months in these five years, averaging around 66 arrests, or .71 per cent of the total 9,277 arrests, while September 1933 had the highest—319, or 3.4 per cent of the grand total.

In consulting the climatic records for these months it was discovered that in 1930 the temperature and humidity for March was moderate. In September, 1933, the average temperature for that month was 97 degrees with an average humidity of 79 in the morning, and 53 in the evening. Considering that these figures are the averages taken for the month, one can see that the weather appears to have brought about much discomfort which resulted in increased crime against the person.

CHARGES AGAINST FEMALE DELINQUENTS

<i>Offense</i>	<i>Total Number for Five-Years</i>	<i>Percent. of 9,277 Total Arrests for Five Years</i>
1. Vagrancy and Prostitution.....	1852	19.9
2. Drunkenness	974	10.4
3. Investigations	897	9.6
4. Inmate of Disorderly House.....	593	6.3
5. Disturbing the Peace.....	552	6.3
6. Drunk and Disturbing the Peace....	547	5.8
7. Complaining Witness	403	4.3
8. Petit Larceny	342	3.6
9. Reckless Driving	342	3.6
10. Unlawful Possession of Intox. Liquors	313	3.3
11. Vagrancy	229	2.4
12. Keeper of Disorderly House.....	204	2.1
13. Inmate of Ill-governed House.....	176	1.8
14. Violating Auto Parking Ordinance....	163	1.7
15. Incurability	144	1.5
16. Assault and Battery	126	1.24
17. Safe-keeping	112	1.20
18. Keeper of Ill-governed House.....	101	1.08

³ Cf. Dexter, E. G., "Weather Influences"—New York and Denver.

Some forty-three other charges are listed further with percentages all less than one per cent, ending with "causing death while unlawfully operating auto." Vagrancy and Prostitution head the list of offenses with nearly one fifth of the cases. Drunkenness comes next with 10.4 per cent of the 9,277 offenses during these five years. Dr. Anderson found in studying one hundred cases at court, that 83 out of the 100 were mental cases.⁴ In 68 of the 100 cases, the individuals suffered from pathological conditions. Much of this came under the heading of feeble-mindedness. Twenty-one of the women were in poor physical conditions. Most of these women he found were unable to support themselves. In conclusion, he expounded the theory that drink was more degrading in women than it was in men. Perhaps this is due chiefly to women's physical make-up.

The disorderly house is the house where too much drinking is practised. Six and three-tenths per cent of the 9,277 women were from such places. Most of them were housewives, many of whom were with their husbands. They themselves may not have been intoxicated, but some of their group were and were causing a disturbance; therefore, all in the party were taken in the arrest.

"Investigation" is the charge often placed on a suspect until the authorities can verify their suspicions. However, at the Central station it is often used to cover up a case such as murder or burglary or to protect delinquent girls. This is done so that the newspaper reporter will not do harm to the delinquent's name and character.

"Disturbing the peace" ranks fifth. A study of the table of distribution of arrests showed that the authorities separated "drunkenness and disturbing the peace" from the afore-mentioned "disturbing the peace." The percentage of this fifth charge was 6.3, while the combination charge had a percentage of 5.8.

Petit larceny ranked eight, while grand larceny ranked thirty-seventh.

During the five years one sees that the offenses: investigation, "keeper of disorderly house," larceny from person, murder, adultery, incorrigibility, "inmate-of-disorderly-house," possession of liquor, and violations of the Harrison Drug Act have noticeably decreased.

The keepers of ill-governed (houses of prostitution) houses and their inmates have increased, as have vagrancy and prostitution. Petit larceny, insufficient funds to meet checks, malicious destruc-

⁴ Anderson, V. V., "Drunkenness as Seen Among Women in Court," *Mental Hygiene*, Vol. 3, p. 265, Apr., 1918.

tion of property, reckless driving, disturbing the peace, and drunkenness are some of the offenses that have increased.

Crimes, therefore, against property and against person have increased in the last five years. This is due in part to the economic status of these groups. Also the environment in which many of them live is a factor. Sending the offenders back to the same environment from which they come is only inviting more trouble. One jail matron states that most of these women are recidivists. They are not very mobile. They go back to the old places because the rents are cheaper in the run down slum districts. Then, too, their friends are there. They do not have very many, and they wish to keep what few they have. Also they help one another in securing money for food, rent, and the like.

Occupations

A study of the following tables shows that the number of housewives who have become delinquent has increased .37 per cent over that of 1933 and 1.24 per cent over the number of housewives in 1930. Their number decreased somewhat in 1932. At that time it was 33.71 per cent of the total number of arrests made in that year. In 1934, 40.24 per cent of Omaha's female delinquents were housewives.

The next highest number was domestics. It is the general conclusion after interviewing a number of the girls that conditions connected with this work cause many of these girls to deviate from the ethical norm. Such conditions could readily be improved if the public consciousness were properly aroused.

The next highest group was the prostitutes. Some are girls out of work, or receiving a low wage, and some are housewives. Most of them get into their "jobs" through friends and acquaintances that they meet at dance halls and on the streets. There are many repeaters among them. They are not very mobile, usually staying in places of low rent. Their number has increased 203 in five years, but the last two years show some decrease. Prostitutes represented 23.82 per cent of the female criminal population in 1933 and 20.69 per cent in 1934.

Waitresses make up the next highest group. The environment and persons they meet each day are factors in their delinquency. They comprise 3.5 per cent of the total number of the female delinquents for the past five years.

The number of students, or .4 per cent of 9,277 total for five years, has decreased eleven since 1933. They were arrested chiefly for drunkenness.

For the five year period, teachers have decreased in numbers. Housewives, clerks, and prostitutes have increased.

DISTRIBUTIONS OF OCCUPATIONS

Main Percentages for the Five Years

	No. of Women	Percent.
Housewives	3551	38.2
Domestics	2795	30.1
Prostitutes	1815	19.5
Waitresses	327	3.5
Students	41	.4
Teachers	15	.1

Crime among white women showed a greater increase than in any other racial group. Negro women showed a gradual decrease until 1933, at which time there was an increase of nearly 6 per cent; but in 1934 a general decrease of about 7 per cent was noted. The other racial groups are scarcely represented as their numbers are so very low. On the whole, female delinquency is on the increase.

RACIAL DISTRIBUTION FOR THE FIVE YEAR PERIOD

Race	No. for 5 Years	Percent.
White	6397	68.96
Colored	2846	30.66
Indians	11	.14
Mexicans	8	.08
Brown	15	.16
Total	9277	100.00

Dispositions

In 1930 more women forfeited their bonds than in any other year. Over 4 per cent forfeited their bonds in 1930 and only 2.2 in 1934. No doubt the scarcity of ready cash has much to do with people keeping their appointments with the law.

The district court handled 8.18 per cent of the 9,277 cases.

The police took nearly .4 per cent of the women to the county hospital. Many of these were insane.

Less than .2 per cent went to the county jail. The police authorities do not care to keep any woman in jail if other means can be provided for her. Often she is dismissed after a good lecture. The dismissals for the five years amounted to 3,323. In other words, 35.8 per cent of the total 9,277 women arrested in the past five years were dismissed. The number of dismissals has steadily increased from 387 in 1930 to 848 in 1934.

Other authorities took care of 123, or 1.32 per cent of the 9,277 cases.

The United States authorities handled 2.6 per cent of the 9,277 arrests during the five years. In 1932 they handled the largest number of cases for the five years. There was a decrease for Federal Government cases from 1932 to 1934 from 104 to 13, or from 1.12 to .14 per cent.

The popular belief in Omaha is that, of the city as a whole, the South Side ranks the highest in criminality. This study shows that the South Side handles about 5 per cent of the total 9,277 cases for the five years which is very small in proportion to the population. This section of the city is populated largely by foreign born and a high per cent of the women work in the packing plants.

Juvenile authorities were given jurisdiction over 176, or 1.8 per cent of the cases.

During this period, only 3,660, or 40.5 per cent, of the women arrested were convicted and paid fines or served sentences in jail. This general increase of female delinquents in Omaha is no doubt a reflection of the economic and social turmoil of the present and past five years. Such conditions seem to affect the women more readily than the men. The spirit of freedom and individualism causes the female population to be more or less restless and dissatisfied. The whole realm of female criminality needs much scientific study.