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Ellis, AJ

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Fact

Nearly all violent crimes are committed by males

Dr Anthony Ellis
University of Salford

The overwhelming involvement of men as perpetrators in incidents of violence, particularly violence that is lethal or causes serious physical harm, is a pattern that is so consistent across time and place that it prompted criminologist Steve Hall (2002) to remark that this statement is the closest that criminology has come to establishing a ‘fact’ about crime; and he is not alone in making this assertion. Tim Edwards (2006) reached similar conclusions when he claimed that from “pub brawls to building bombs, and from forced prison buggery to battered wives, the problem seems to be men” (p.44). Reflecting upon the number of men prosecuted in Britain during 2015/16 for offences against women, Owen Jones (2016), writing in the Guardian newspaper, described male violence as a ‘pandemic’.

These assertions are supported by a considerable amount of evidence. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) – a face-to-face survey that asks a sample of people that are resident in households about their experiences of being a victim of crime – found during 2014/15 that in over three quarters of incidents of violent crimes that were reported during that period of time, the victim identified the perpetrator as a male. In cases of homicide brought to the attention of the police during the year ending March 2015, 90% involved male perpetrators (ONS, 2016). Importantly though, men in contemporary England and Wales are often the victims of serious violence too: in the same measurement period as previously mentioned, 64% of homicide victims were male (ONS, 2016). When examining the issue of violence from a global perspective, these aforementioned national trends are amplified. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that “some 95 per cent of

homicide perpetrators at the global level are male; males also account for almost 8 out of every 10 homicide victims” (2013, p.11).

When it comes to the issue of explaining this ‘fact’ it would appear logical, given the pervasive nature of male involvement in violent crimes, that there is a biological basis to this behaviour – that there must be something in the biological make-up of males that makes them more aggressive. Understandably then, some criminologists have subjected the male body to deep scrutiny, convinced that the answer to this relationship lies in hormones, genetics or evolutionary psychology. Criminologist Adrian Raine (2013), a leading exponent of biological explanations for violent crimes, suggests that human evolution may provide a foundation to the patterns described previously. This line of argument suggests that ultimately humans are driven by the selfish need to ensure their genes are reproduced in the next generation. For males, this rests on their ability to acquire status, resources and provide protection, which are attractive to a potential female partner, and violence can provide these things while eliminating other males who may offer competition.

It is plausible that genetic evolution may play some role in the quite stark patterns of violent behaviour involving men that we see replicated in societies across the globe. Yet, while physically violent behaviour is in the vast majority of cases perpetrated by male bodies, there is further variability and complexity to this pattern. First of all, we must acknowledge the obverse to this ‘fact’ that we are concerned with here, which is simply this: not all men commit physical violence against others. Immediately, this renders problematic the claim that male biology is responsible, while adding a layer of considerable complexity that continues to bedevil our attempts to fully explain what remains a very evident association. In addition, violence perpetrated by males is variable by space and place, as is the amount of violence committed by males at particular points in history, which suggests that other non-biological factors play a significant role in this relationship. So, if the fact that some men commit nearly all violent crimes cannot be accounted for by biology alone, where else might we look for underlying explanations for this ‘fact’?

A useful place to start for American Psychiatrist James Gilligan (2000) are psychological and social factors. For Gilligan, male violence “has far more to do with the cultural construction of

manhood than it does with...biology" (Gilligan, 2000, p.223). Gilligan is concerned here with the various expectations and pressures that societies and their members can place upon males and how this affects them psychologically. The complexity of contemporary human societies, social life, and of patterns of violent crime, indicates that our attention must be directed towards social, political and economic issues as well, and how these might affect human behaviour.

Feminist and Pro-Feminist scholars were among the first to give the consequences of the contemporary cultural construction of manhood and masculinity, that Gilligan alerts us to, the attention that it quite obviously requires. While Feminist scholarship is diverse, what generally unites Feminist arguments that address male violence is that this behaviour is at root a manifestation of the evident inequalities that exist between men and between men and women. Given that contemporarily and throughout history men have tended to occupy more privileged and advantageous positions within society, these patterns can be interpreted as symptomatic of these relations of power and dominance and the use of violence to maintain these, particularly if they are perceived to be coming under threat (Connell, 2005). Some dominant cultural constructions of manhood and masculinity are often regarded then as unhealthy and damaging for both women and men, because of their unrealistic expectations and the pressures they exert upon individual men to be strong, unemotional, competitive, domineering and successful.

Inequality of an economic kind is also an important factor in better understanding this relationship, with strong evidence that violent crimes are higher in more unequal societies and largely concentrated amongst specific groups of socially and economically disadvantaged males (Ellis, 2016; Hall, 2002; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). This complicates to some extent the suggestion that physical violence serves as a strategy to consolidate male power in our society, as those men that hold positions of genuine power and influence and that are wealthy, rarely achieve this through using physical violence themselves. Wealthy and powerful British men like Sir Alan Sugar, Sir Richard Branson and former Prime Minister Tony Blair, will no doubt have had to behave 'aggressively' and in a competitive fashion at times to reach the positions they occupy, but they did not amass their wealth and influence through using physical violence themselves. Of course, during his reign as Prime Minister, Tony Blair

oversaw several large-scale military operations that resulted in large numbers of fatalities, but the important point being made here is that the route to genuine power in British society rarely involves the use of personal violence. It is, rather, some of those men with the least power in society that so often use violence most persistently and perceive a reputation for using violence to be a valuable personal asset. Men that use serious physical violence themselves are, rather, subjected to strong state repression and control and often find themselves moving between prison sentences and living a precarious and insecure existence in impoverished communities. In-depth research conducted by criminologists that has enabled them to get up close and personal with such men reveals how strongly various social and economic disadvantages loom large within their biographies, as do issues of substance-misuse, family breakdown, physical and emotional abuse, and victimisation. Many of these men have complicated relationships with violence that are partially rooted in traumatic and humiliating personal experiences, social and economic disadvantage, as well as particular beliefs and assumptions about what it means to be masculine (Ellis, 2016; Ellis et al, 2017).

In summary then, while the evident and strong relationship that exists between the use of violence and the male population constitutes as close to a 'fact' about crime as criminologists have arguably come, a more careful examination of patterns of male violence indicates there is still much about this, albeit very strong pattern, that remains unclear and requires further exploration and explanation.

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