

# **Dramatic Portrayals of Violent Women: Female Offenders on Prime Time Crime Dramas**

**By**

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Female offenders are fairly common on prime time crime dramas, yet little is known about how these characters are depicted on these shows. This study examines four popular crime dramas to understand how women are portrayed and the images associated with these characters. The prevalence of these characters varies by program, but their characteristics are fairly consistent. Female offenders are primarily shown as white, violent and driven by greed, revenge, and most commonly, love. When telling stories of female offenders, crime dramas connect these women to male accomplices and also explore violence driven by maternal instinct. Overall, these programs create a relatively non-threatening image of female offenders while simultaneously reinforcing their guilt, thereby making them appear deserving of punishment.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The American television viewing audience has an appetite for crime-related programs. As of the 1960s, one-fourth of all shows on prime time have contained crime-related storylines (Surette, 1998). Crime-related programs come in various forms, from reality-based shows such as *Cops* to sitcoms such as *Reno-911*, and also in made-for-television movies. Even daytime soap operas and prime time soap operas, such as the recent hit *Desperate Housewives*, contain crime-related storylines. Probably the most consistent and ever-present crime format is the drama, usually an hour-long weekly program depicting some aspect of the criminal justice system and the people it pursues. Today's prime time line up is filled with these crime dramas, which increased in number following the terrorist attacks of 2001 (Poniewozik, 2004). For instance, nearly 41 percent of CBS's spring 2006 prime time line up consisted of crime dramas (CBS, 2006). These crime dramas typically focus on the police or the legal system, presenting battles between good and evil (Carlson, 1985; Sumser, 1996). Filled with dramatic confrontations between officials and offenders, these programs offer the viewing audience a course in the workings of the criminal justice system and the people who are processed through it.

Mirroring the actual relationship between gender and crime, most offenders portrayed in the entertainment media are male (Escholz, Mallard & Flynn, 2004; Fabianic, 1997; Lichter & Lichter, 1983; Sumser, 1996), which is also true of crime dramas. Research indicates that between 6 and 25 percent of offenders depicted on crime dramas are female (Escholz et al., 2004; Fabianic, 1997; Soulliere, 2003a); however, we do not know much about how female

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offenders are portrayed on these programs. Most of the research examines these dramas in a more general sense, or it focuses on Hollywood's image of female killers, completely excluding television portrayals. The purpose of this study is to examine how female offenders are portrayed on prime time crime dramas by examining their characteristics and the images commonly associated with these characters. It is believed that these crime dramas present an inaccurate and exaggerated picture of the female offender, enforcing the belief that these women are violent and deserving of punishment.

### **FEMALE OFFENDERS IN THE ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA**

Violent women are relatively popular characters in the entertainment media, drawing "strong responses, on screen and off" (McCaughey & King, 2001, p. 1). Not all violent female characters break the law, however. There is a considerable amount of research on "action chicks" who typically use violence in the name of justice (e.g., Inness, 1999, 2004; Tasker, 1998). On the other hand, there is relatively little literature on female offenders in the entertainment media, and that which exists tends to focus on the female killer in film (e.g., Bailey & Hale, 2004; Inness, 1999; Tasker, 1998).

In general, the entertainment media projects an image of female offenders who are beautiful, resourceful, and violent. Of particular interest to this study, however, is how these characters are depicted in crime dramas. The types of female characters in crime dramas are influenced by the more general portrayal of females in the entertainment media. Females on television "tend to be young, White, stereotypically feminine, and preoccupied with romance" (Bond-Maupin, 1998, p. 30); female offenders are not very different. The images of these women represent dominant beliefs about femininity, thus women are more likely to be portrayed as victims than offenders on television (Bond-Maupin, 1998; Escholz et al., 2004; Sparks, 1993; Sumser, 1996). Despite the preference to portray females as victims, they are also portrayed as offenders and a few studies have examined how the female offender is depicted on television.

Bond-Maupin's (1998) analysis of *America's Most Wanted* provides insight into the portrayal of female offenders on prime time television. Even though this particular program is a reality show, to an extent the reenactments are fictionalized. Female offenders on *America's Most Wanted* are ethnically diverse, older, and greedy. "These women were seductive, preoccupied with sex, and sexually manipulative. Their male victims were unable or unwilling to resist their sexual advances" (Bond-Maupin, 1998, p. 36). Clearly these women are not under the control of any males. In fact, the women who had male accomplices were likely to be the masterminds behind the criminal activity. Finally, *America's Most Wanted* utilizes images of femininity to convince the viewers of her guilt and to persuade them that these women are truly bad and need to be caught (Bond-Maupin, 1998). These findings give us a starting point for understanding how female offenders are viewed on television; however, what we do not know is how these images compare to those depicted on purely fictional television programs.

In general female offenders on television are portrayed as murderers and their behavior is often linked to their romantic entanglements with the opposite gender (Estep, 1982). More specifically, however, how do crime dramas depict female offenders? Since there are a limited number of studies that have focused on the content of crime dramas, (Escholz et al., 2004), it is

not surprising that there is little information on how female offenders are portrayed on these programs. Studies that examine gender and offending on prime time crime dramas typically do so in the larger context of how these programs portray offenders and other characters; thus, an in-depth analysis of how female offenders are depicted does not take place. Most of the research simply indicates the percentage of offenders that are female. For example, a study of one season of two popular crime dramas found that six percent of the offenders on *NYPD Blue* and 17 percent of the offenders on *Law & Order* are female (Escholz et al., 2004). The most detail on female offenders is provided by Soulliere (2003b) in an analysis of murder on these programs. Out of the 75 murders, 17 of the offenders were female and most of these characters killed members of their own family. Female murderers on these dramas were not likely to use weapons, rather they killed their victims in other ways, such as starving a child to death (Soulliere, 2003b). However, none of the other factors described in this study are broken down by gender. In general it has been noted that female characters on these programs have changed over time. Compared to the 1960s, female characters today are more likely to be depicted as suspects, but they are less likely to be cast as villains (Sumser, 1996). All in all, the research tends to agree that “when females are shown in crime dramas they are more likely to be shown in positive and sympathetic roles, such as victim or CJ personnel...than as offenders” (Escholz et al., 2004, p. 170; See also Sumser, 1996, Sparks, 1992). Thus, it is not surprising that there is not a lot of research on female offenders on these programs.

Research on film portrayals of female offenders may provide some insight into their depiction on the small screen. Hollywood presents a fairly limited view of the female offender. Chesney-Lind (1999) informs us that “if Hollywood’s representation of crime were accurate, unruly women who were not busy trying to kill men would be stalking (*Fatal Attraction*) and sexually harassing them (*Disclosure*)” (p. 120). For the most part, female offenders presented to us by Hollywood filmmakers are violent, and more specifically are murderers. These murderesses are presented to viewers in various ways. Some are depicted as cold blooded-killers, while others are shown as being on the edge of madness (Bailey & Hale, 2004). Probably the most famous female killer in film is the femme fatale (Bailey & Hale, 2004). Since she first appeared on screen it has been common to tie sexuality to murder in various ways, ranging from the “sex kitten” who uses her sexuality to cover up her crimes (Inness, 1999) to the sexually ambivalent or lesbian female killer (Bailey & Hale, 2004). Lastly, it is common to show female killers transforming from victim to aggressor, especially in films containing rape-revenge storylines (Bailey & Hale, 2004; Tasker, 1998). Even though there is some diversity in the way female killers are depicted in films, Hollywood offers viewers a very limited look at female offenders. Since the female offender is a recurring type of character on crime dramas, these programs may offer viewers a greater assortment of female offenders than seen in films. Yet, we do not know how they are portrayed. Are they portrayed in a manner similar to the female offenders on reality-based programs such as *America’s Most Wanted*? Do crime dramas depict these offenders the way that Hollywood portrays them? Or does the prime time crime drama offer a completely unique look at female offenders?

## METHODOLOGY

There are a plethora of crime dramas to select from when conducting research on these programs. For this study, a crime drama is defined as a one-hour, fictional program depicting an

aspect of the criminal justice system and the people processed through the system. This definition excludes reality-based programs such as *Cops*. Nielsen ratings were used to determine the top-rated crime dramas for this examination of how these shows portray female offenders (Nielsen Media Research, 2005). From this list four crime dramas were selected—*CSI*, *Law & Order*, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, and *Without a Trace*. Each of these programs is a crime drama that investigates criminal behavior, mainly from the view of law enforcement. This sample of crime dramas was not randomly selected, which means that the results may not be generalizable to all crime dramas. The decision was made to select the most popular crime dramas because these are the programs that reach the greatest number of viewers and, therefore, have the greatest potential to impact viewers. In addition, these dramas are also the most readily available with seasons released on DVD, thus facilitating data collection.

An objective of this study was to describe female offenders on these programs, including their prevalence; therefore, all episodes from a single season of each drama were examined. The season analyzed was selected, in part, based on DVD availability. The debut season of three of the crime dramas was included in this study. The exception was *Law & Order*. At the time of this study the first couple of seasons from the early 1990s as well as the 14<sup>th</sup> season were available on DVD. The 14<sup>th</sup> season of *Law & Order* was selected for this study because, according to Rapping (2003), as *Law & Order* has progressed the story lines have become more conservative; therefore, the premiere season may present a completely different view of female offenders than more recent episodes. This season of *Law & Order* aired in 2003 and 2004, during which there were 24 episodes depicting one case per episode. *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* debuted in 2001. During the first season of this program there were 22 episodes, containing one case each. *CSI* is the third crime drama included in this study. The first season of this program aired in 2000 and contained 23 episodes. Each episode of this drama included the investigation of multiple cases, with 50 cases depicted in all. Lastly, *Without a Trace* debuted in 2002. This season contained 21 episodes depicting 20 cases in all. Some may be concerned that the seasons examined span a five-year period. Over time, the ideological focus of crime dramas has changed from a liberal due process message to a more conservative crime control message (Lenz, 2003). If this shift occurred during the time period examined then the programs may not be comparable; however, according to Lenz (2003), after 1990 crime dramas shifted to a new transitional era that does not whole heartedly endorse either ideological message.

Overall, data were collected from 90 episodes of these crime dramas. Thirty-nine (43.3%) of these episodes contain female offenders. Data were collected in order to offer a description of female offenders on these programs, which also offers the opportunity to check the validity of the portrayal of female offenders by comparing the data to what is known about actual female offenders. In addition, information was collected from the dialogue and images, which allows for the identification of the various messages contained in these portrayals.

For each offender, gender, race, and other demographics were recorded. Demographics were based on visual cues, while information such as crime committed and victim-offender relationship was based on relevant dialogue. For this study, an offender is considered anyone who violates a federal or state law. This conceptualization is not limited to those who commit felonies or violent crimes. For example, if a character violates probation or commits a status

offense, such as running away or truancy, he/she would be counted as an offender. Lastly, the offenders did not need to be main characters. If a known offender was included in the investigation of the crime he/she was counted and relevant information was collected. In addition to describing the offender, information on the offenses committed was recorded. This information includes the type of crime and whether it was committed alone or with accomplices. Finally, victim information was coded, including gender, race, and relationship to the offender (e.g., stranger, acquaintance, intimate). This information was collected for all offenders portrayed in these crime dramas.

Additional data were collected exclusively for the female offenders. These data were collected through an analysis of the dialogue and overall plot. Research consistently indicates that most female offenders have extensive histories of physical and/or sexual abuse (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004), which in many instances contributes to their criminal behavior in one way or another. For each female offender, it was noted whether or not she was victimized and if so, in what way. Research also indicates that female offenders are more likely than their male counterparts to have drug problems (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004), thus information of drug use or reference to drug abuse was recorded. Information was also collected from the dialogue to determine the main explanation for the criminal behavior. The goal was to identify criminological theories used to explain female criminality on these programs. For the most part, however, these shows do not provide enough information to suggest a particular theory, although, when examining the plots and more specifically the dialogue, the main motivations for crime were apparent. Together all of this information provides a general description of these characters and their behavior and allows us to delve into the messages associated with this type of character.

## RESULTS

Female offenders were fairly common on the crime dramas examined. These women were similar to other women on television and in some ways to the female offenders presented to us by Hollywood.

**Table 1**  
***Gender of Offenders on Prime Time Crime Dramas***

	<i>CSI</i> N=55	<i>Law &amp; Order</i> N=43	<i>Law &amp; Order: Criminal Intent</i> N=70	<i>Without a Trace</i> N=28
Male	63.6%	79.1%	71.4%	82.1%
Female	36.4%	20.9%	28.6%	17.9%

On the crime dramas analyzed, the percentage of offenders who were female ranged from nearly 18 percent on *Without a Trace* to over 36 percent on *CSI* (see Table 1). Previous studies of crime dramas indicate that the percentage of female offenders ranges from 6 to 25 percent (e.g., Escholz et al., 2004; Sumser, 1996). None of the programs accurately reflect the actual percentage of offenders who are female, both under- and over-representing their prevalence. In 2000, 22.2% of those arrested were female (FBI, 2001), yet approximately 36 percent of the offenders in the season of *CSI* airing that year were female. Similarly, 22.5% of those arrested in

2001 were female (FBI, 2002), while nearly 29 percent of the offenders on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* were female during that season. In both 2002 and 2003, approximately 23 percent of those arrested were females (FBI, 2003; FBI, 2004), yet both *Law & Order* (20.9%) and *Without a Trace* (17.9%) present a smaller percentage of offenders as female. This was not the only inaccuracy portrayed on these programs. The overwhelming majority of female offenders on each crime drama were white (see Table 2), thus offering very little racial diversity in their characters and failing to present an accurate depiction of the females who are processed through the American criminal justice system.

**Table 2**  
***Characteristics of Female Offenders on Prime Time Crime Dramas***

	<i>CSI</i> N=20	<i>Law &amp; Order</i> N=9	<i>Law &amp; Order: Criminal Intent</i> N=20	<i>Without a Trace</i> N=5
White	90%	77.8%	90%	80%
Murderers	70%	66.7%	55%	20%
Work with accomplices	55%	14%	60%	85%

While female offenders are most commonly arrested for larceny and theft, as well as other non-violent offenses, most of the female offenders on the programs examined were violent. Research on crime dramas shows that murder was the most common offense represented (e.g., Fabianic, 1997; Soulliere, 2003b), which is also the case for the female offenders examined in this study. For example, on *CSI* 70 percent of the female offenders committed the crime of murder, which is an incredible exaggeration of females' involvement in this specific offense. According to the FBI (2001), in 2000 there were approximately 1.6 million women arrested, 775 (.04%) of which were arrested for murder. Most of the other crimes committed by the female offenders on these crime dramas were also violent, and if not violent were typically felonies. On *CSI* the women were also involved in robbery, fraud, filing a false police report, and faking a kidnapping. On *Law & Order* female offenders also committed arson, perjury, kidnapping, hit and run, and bribery. *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* portrayed female offenders involved in more unusual offenses, such as art fraud and tax fraud, as well as more common offenses such as bribery, theft, prostitution, and violating probation. Lastly, the female offenders on *Without a Trace* who do not commit murder were involved in kidnapping, blackmail, and forgery. Regardless of the type of crime these women committed, most of their victims were people they knew—particularly male acquaintances. While it is true that females are likely to victimize people they know, they are not as likely to victimize males as other females (BJS, 1999).

### *Criminal Motivations*

Female offenders commit crimes for many different reasons. Commonly it is related to physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, and poverty. However, these were not the factors that motivated female offenders on these crime dramas. While research indicates that female offenders have extensive histories of abuse, this was not a common characteristic of the female offenders shown on the crime dramas analyzed. *CSI* was the only series examined to show a

connection between criminal behavior and victimization. While five of the female offenders on this particular season of *CSI* were victimized in some way, only the scenario projected in “Blood Drops” was close to reality; although, even this episode did not present the typical reaction to the situation. In this episode, a teenage girl had a boy kill her family because her father sexually abused her and her daughter. The remaining episodes showed females who were victimized as a result of their own involvement in criminal behavior. This view of the relationship between crime and victimization suggests to the audience that these women deserved what they got because they themselves are bad, thereby ignoring the reality faced by many female offenders. These crime dramas also did not show female offenders as drug abusers, nor did they focus on the relationship between poverty and crime for these women. Instead, the motivations presented were much more self-centered and individualistic.

The main reasons women on these crime dramas commit crime were similar to those noted in previous studies of crime dramas (e.g., Fabianic, 1997; Lichter & Lichter, 1983). For example, on *CSI* the factors motivating the criminal behavior of these females were greed, revenge, and self-preservation. The most commonly projected motivation, however, was love. Most of the female offenders committed their crime either to protect a loved one or to ensure that someone would continue to love them. Similar motivations were depicted on *Law & Order*, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* and *Without a Trace*. Both of the *Law & Order* series also tackled other motivations, including fear and the desire for fame or recognition. These motivations are relatively simplistic and easily recognized by the labels associated with the crimes and offenders, which is similar to Fabianic’s (1997) finding. Delving further into the circumstances surrounding the crimes and the characteristics of the women presented in these crime dramas, provides some additional reasoning into their involvement in crime. In particular these dramas present messages about power and control, as well as the role of motherhood in the these women’s lives.

#### *Power and control: Female offenders and their accomplices*

On most of the crime dramas examined, the majority of female offenders committed their crimes with at least one accomplice. Fifty-five percent of the female offenders on *CSI*, 60 percent on *Without a Trace*, and 85 percent on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* did not act alone. *Law & Order* was the only program examined that portrayed most female offenders acting alone, with less than 14 percent having any accomplices. More specifically, twenty-one (23.3%) episodes contained cases in which the female offender committed her crime with a male accomplice. Some of the dramas used this story line more than others. For example, all of the female offenders with accomplices on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* were aided by at least one male in the commission of their crimes, and nearly 64 percent of those on *CSI* committed a crime with a man.

The relationship dynamics between male and female co-offenders set the stage for messages about power and control. Many of the episodes that contained a female offender with a male accomplice did not focus on the relationship and therefore these themes were not apparent. These episodes presented females working together with males in the commission of their crimes, leaving the audience assuming that there was an equal partnership, which is highly unlikely. However, other episodes exaggerated power differences by depicting female offenders

as either powerless or extremely powerful in relation to men and these elements were tied to their involvement in criminal behavior.

Some of the episodes depicted female offenders as under the control of their male counterparts. Mimicking traditional gender roles and power relationships, the woman did exactly what the man wanted her to do. He did not simply ask for her help, rather he played on her weaknesses forcing her to break the law. In doing so, she is depicted as weak and helpless. According to Sumser (1996), unattractive females on crime dramas are the ones who are willing to do anything for the attention of a man. In the episodes examined in this study, it was not necessarily unattractive women, but were women with weaknesses, such as low-self esteem, drug addictions, and sexual perversions, that made them willing to do anything for a man. Ultimately, these women were able to overcome their powerlessness, but only when they had help from or were coerced by the criminal justice system. Sometimes this was an act of self-preservation and other times it was an act of revenge; either way, in the end they broke away from the controlling man in their life.

One powerless woman was seen in an episode of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* entitled "One," which portrayed a woman who was emotionally abused by her boyfriend. He forced her to do numerous things by stating, "if you love me..." In terms of criminal behavior, he used this emotional manipulation to coerce her into helping with a diamond heist that ended in murder. She was under his complete control. Even when she had the opportunity to keep the diamonds for herself, she did not turn on him. According to the investigators, she did everything for him. It is only when the detectives played on this love that she turned on him. In *CSI*'s "I-15 Murders," the female offender helped her boyfriend lure women from public restrooms so that he could murder them. The investigators wondered if the killer "is a man with a woman, who would do anything that he asks," which characterized the relationship between the killer and his girlfriend. Finally, *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*'s "Seizure" contained a woman who was manipulated and controlled by a psychologist and a serial killer. Ultimately the serial killer was the one who controlled her, forcing her to kill for him. The other examples of powerless women in these crime dramas were not so dramatic. For example, in "The Good Doctor" from *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*, a man convinced his girlfriend to dress up like his missing wife so that someone would report seeing her. While there was a murder in this episode, the powerless female was not forced to commit any violent acts.

On the other hand, some episodes of these crime dramas depicted women in control of their male accomplices. These women used their sexuality, their money, and their tough attitudes to persuade men to commit crimes for them. For example, in an episode of *CSI* entitled "Blood Drops," a young girl used her sexuality to persuade a boy to kill her entire family. A rich woman manipulated her husband into having her future daughter-in-law murdered by threatening to take away his money in *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*'s "Smothered." A woman's drive for success and her toughness was the driving force behind several school police officers committing various crimes in *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*'s "Badge." Looking at these stories shows us that these women are actually not very different from the powerless females depicted in these crime dramas. These women were also willing to do anything for love, but they had the power to get someone else to do it for them.



*Deadly Mothers*

Crime dramas also link criminal behavior to one of the ultimate signs of femininity—motherhood. Women are supposed to be nurturing, to desire motherhood, and to do anything to protect their children; however, the good mother can go too far with her actions resulting in criminal behavior. The crime dramas linked motherhood to criminality in other ways as well. The desire for motherhood drove some women to commit crime, while the desire to be free from the constraints of motherhood was also a driving force. For the most part the way that motherhood is incorporated into the crime drama allows the audience to understand and almost sympathize with the female offender. In doing so, it limits her threat. Only when she is non-maternal is she a true threat to our beliefs. In all, twelve (30.7%) of the episodes examined focused on the connection between motherhood and criminal behavior.

Seven episodes contained female offenders that in some respects could be considered good mothers. These women did what was required to protect their children from a perceived or actual threat. Two of the episodes entailed a mother involved in murder to protect her child from physical danger or abuse; however, the situation was not presented as self-defense. “Blood Drops” (*CSI*) depicted a teenage girl who had a boy kill her entire family, to protect her daughter from being sexually abused. Another episode of *CSI* entitled “Unfriendly Skies” (*CSI*) included a group of offenders who killed an out-of-control man on an airplane. One of the offenders was a mother whose daughter was on the plane. Ultimately the reason for her participation was brought to light when she admitted that she did it to protect her daughter, thus this professional and typically law-abiding woman acted as she normally would not in order to save her daughter.

Another version of the protective mother was when she attempted to protect her children from a perceived threat. These mothers thought they were doing what was best for their children, even if no one else could see the threat. The first example of a protective mother was found in an episode of *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* entitled “Smothered.” This mother thought she was protecting her son from a woman who was not good enough for him when she ordered her husband to hire someone to kill her son’s fiancée. Another protective mother was featured in this series in the episode “Badge.” According to the plot, the working class African American mother wanted her daughters to have a better life than she had and was willing to do whatever she needed to for this to happen. When she was arrested she pleads, “don’t take my daughters away. I did it for them. I sacrificed everything for them.” Her plea sums up the viewpoint of this type of mother found in crime dramas. Other episodes containing this type of mother included *CSI*’s “Gentle, Gentle” and “Face Lift;” however, their actions were not as dramatic as the other examples. These mothers lied to the police in order to save a child from being arrested.

The desire to have children also drove some women to commit a crime. Women are supposed to be able to have children, so a woman’s inability to do what her body is intended to do may be seen as an understandable reason for criminal behavior. Four episodes of the crime dramas examined contained the story of a woman desiring motherhood so much that she would do anything. *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*’s “Faith” revolved around a couple claiming to be the guardians of a non-existent child with a rare disease. Believing that Erica was real, another woman murdered a man who threatened her. Ultimately, in this episode the inability to conceive

combined with the desire for motherhood was shown to produce madness and homicidal tendencies. The inability to conceive, as well as cultural pressures to conform also lead to murder in *Law & Order's* "Caviar Emptor." In this particular episode a Persian female could not conceive and planned to adopt a Chinese baby; however, her father threatened to disown her. She was arrested and tried for the murder of her father; however, she was acquitted when her husband confessed to the crime. Even though her husband confessed to the murder, the audience is left believing that her desire as a woman to become a mother and her duties as a Persian female conflicted and the end result was murder. *Law & Order's* "Married with Children" dealt with the issue of gay adoption and questioned the legality of motherhood. The plot featured the murder of a woman by her former lover. During a custody dispute one of the women murdered the other and took the child. It was her love for the child and her frustration over not being recognized as a parent of the child that was the apparent motive for this woman's offenses. She was at the same time desiring motherhood, which legally she is not allowed to do, and also acting as a protective mother, doing what she thought was best for the child. Lastly, *Without a Trace's* "Snatch Back" depicted a woman, who had a miscarriage and kidnapped a child she thought was her surrogate; however, she kidnapped the wrong child. An agent questioned why she did not give up the child she kidnapped once she discovered it was not her baby. Another agent responded: "it might not matter at this point. She has the baby and all she wants to be is a mother." Once again the desire for motherhood drives a woman over the edge, making her unstable enough to kidnap a child and to kill herself in the end.

The final connection between motherhood and crime is the mother who murders her own child. While one might think that this type of violence would make for great drama and entertaining television, it was not a common theme in the prime time dramas examined. Only two episodes depicted this connection between motherhood and crime.

The first mother who murders her own child was contained in an episode of *CSI* entitled "Justice is Served," which depicted the murder of a girl on a carnival ride. Forensic evidence suggested that the mother held her daughter under the water until she died. While the mother did not give a clear indication as to why she murdered her daughter, the investigators surmised that she wanted to have the freedom to be with her boyfriend without any attachments. She did not deny this accusation. Her child interfered with her desire for pleasure and freedom, thus in her mind justifying the murder of her own child. According to Hendin (2004), this type of violence, which she refers to as performance violence, is popular in literature about murdering mothers; it shows the reader that "self-absorbed turmoil permits the child to emerge in the mother's mind as an interference with the thirst for the culture's competing ideals—youth, craving for pleasure, or even hedonism sustained by freedom and good looks" (Hendin, 2004, p. 246). The second example did not follow this same storyline, rather the plot presented the audience with a mother who killed one son in order to protect her other son's boxing career. In *Without a Trace's* "No Mas," the mother's struggle to protect her children was central to the plot. She says to one of the FBI agents: "One son. That's better. He gets all of your love. You see, with two you try to love them both the same but you can't." So, the mother killed her "bad" son to save her "good" son. Unfortunately she did so at the cost of her good son's love. "I know he will never forgive me, but what I did...I did for him." Her reaction does not appear to be as selfish as the mother in the first example, and the dialogue almost creates sympathy for this particular murdering mother.

## DISCUSSION

The number of female offenders processed through the criminal justice system has increased substantially over the past two decades. During that time the news, talk shows and other media sources have been reporting on the modern female offender, who is more violent than ever before. While the headlines focused on the “new female offender” in her various reincarnations, there was a change in the way our society reacts to crime by females rather than an actual change in their behavior (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004). Why react so harshly towards this particular generation of female offenders? This change is due in part to the get-tough movement that has introduced mandatory sentences, as well as the unwillingness of politicians to appear soft on criminals, regardless of the criminogenic influences or circumstances that contribute to criminal behavior. One of the reasons these policies are in place is because the public supports them. But why does the public support the harsh punishment of nonviolent offenders? Drawing from various sources of knowledge, their perception about the reality of crime is formed, which in turn influences their beliefs about how to deal with the crime problem.

The truth is that people hold many misconceptions about the crime problem and the offending population. The images of female offenders perpetuated in the crime dramas examined go hand-in-hand with get-tough beliefs. The crimes these women commit and, more importantly, the reasons they are involved in criminal behavior reinforce the need to punish, not rehabilitate. Overall, these crime dramas present an inaccurate and exaggerated portrayal of female offenders, which is not altogether surprising. While some crime dramas boast that their stories are rooted in reality, the images are still fictionalized and need to be entertaining. Therefore, it is the atypical female offender who is the focus, thereby creating a false and demonized image of female offenders.

Female offenders, particularly female murderers, are more prevalent on crime dramas than they are in reality. The exaggeration does not end here. There is no denying that there are females who murder their children, women who use their power to control people, and women who commit crimes of violence out of love or greed; however, these are not typical female offenders. Females in our criminal justice system have extensive histories of abuse (BJS, 1999).

Many of these females runaway or use drugs (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004), they typically do not seduce someone to kill their abuser, as was seen on *CSI*. Female offenders are more likely than male offenders to have substance abuse issues (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004); yet, this theme is not projected in these dramas. Minority and lower-class females are over-represented in the criminal justice system, but rarely seen in crime dramas. Furthermore, the female offender of today is still more likely to have committed a nonviolent crime (BJS, 1999; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; FBI, 2004) and highly likely to be imprisoned for drug-related offenses (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004); however, on the crime drama she is typically violent and rarely uses drugs.

As we can see, the reality of female offenders is missing from these crime dramas. For the most part these characters do not appear to suffer from real problems. Instead these women are demonized. This demonization sends the message that these females are completely responsible for their criminal behavior, which over-endows them with agency. Furthermore, it ignores the social context in which female crime occurs, making it highly unlikely that the public will understand the role society plays in the creation of female criminality.

The factors that are linked to the criminal behavior of these female characters reinforce the belief that women are completely responsible for their crimes and when they are not, it is their own weaknesses that landed them where they are. Most of these women are motivated to commit crime for selfish reasons, particularly love. The motivations for crime associated with these female characters are not altogether different from those found in other studies of crime dramas. Overall, individualistic motivations for crime, particularly expressive motives, are popularized in these programs (Fabianic, 1997; Soulliere, 2003b). Presenting these types of motivations is problematic. Soulliere (2003b) comments “the preoccupation with motives, whether expressive, instrumental or the result of mental illness, calls attention to the individualistic nature of most popular explanations of crime which tend to locate the ‘cause’ of crime within the individual” (p. 28). While Fabianic (1997) points out that the explanations of crime contained in crime dramas are simplistic and for the most part not very controversial. Even more importantly, the explanations offered allow the viewers to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the crime problem, as it is caused by bad individuals not criminogenic factors in society (Fabianic, 1997). Thus, overall the portrait of female offenders presented on crime dramas not only ignores the reality faced by these women who are marginalized in society, it also creates a lack of sympathy and absolves the viewer of any responsibility in real life thereby further enforcing the belief that these women deserve to be punished.

Crime dramas also convey deeper messages that reinforce the belief that these women are completely responsible for their actions. Female offenders on crime dramas are not only violent they are also emotionless and at times powerful; yet, they are still quintessentially feminine. Some female offenders are shown as weak and helpless. Others are portrayed as powerful and use their power to control others, particularly men, into doing what they want them to do. The female characters depicted as powerless become involved in criminal behavior under the control of a male. The female is completely devoid of agency and forced to commit the crime, and in some episodes subsequently forced by the criminal justice system to turn on her lover. While the relationships depicted in these episodes were not physically abusive, most were emotionally abusive. The interaction between abuse and female criminality is not farfetched; criminological research has documented this relationship (e.g., Richie, 1996). Of course, these programs dramatize and exaggerate this relationship and do not address its real-life context. On the other hand, powerful females are also portrayed in these crime dramas. In these episodes the woman is able to control a man in her life and force him to commit a crime for her. This controlling, and some might say manipulative female has been incorporated into criminological theory. In the 1950s, Otto Pollak wrote about the deceitfulness of women, their ability to mask their criminality and to manipulate men (using sexuality) into doing their dirty work (Pollak, 1950). While most criminologists do not place much faith in this theory, it appears that the producers of these crime dramas have incorporated a similar theme into their programs. This depiction makes for exciting entertainment; however, the real life impact is potentially detrimental. These views shape people’s perceptions of crime and justice and have the potential to indirectly influence public policy (Escholz et al., 2004; Surette, 1998).

There is one motivation in particular, however, that may create sympathy among viewers—maternal instinct. Several female offenders on the crime dramas analyzed are driven by this factor. It is their desire to be a good mother or simply to have a child that leads to violence. Each episode containing this type of storyline shows criminal women; however, these

women are not very threatening. This type of woman is doing what society expects her to do. She may be violent, but she is only following her maternal instincts, which allows the audience to sympathize with her. Even the investigators understand where she is coming from. In “Unfriendly Skies” (CSI), one of the investigators is asked how far she, as a mother, would have gone had she and her daughter been on the plane with the unruly passenger. She responds, “all the way...when it involves the protection of my child I fight to the death.” Although this storyline may take a slightly more kindhearted view of the female offender, it does not absolve her of responsibility for the crime. By focusing more on perceived than actual threats and by labeling the acts crimes instead of justifiable (even when appropriate), viewers are still left believing that she is bad and should be punished for her actions. On the flip side, there is no question that the mother who kills her own child is bad, yet this plot is not common on these programs. This character violates several boundaries. She not only commits a crime but she is also not loving or nurturing. Pushing the envelope too far potentially makes her an undesirable character in crime dramas. The murdering mother challenges the fundamental nature of motherhood, which may be why this character was rarely incorporated into the crime dramas. According to Bailey and Hale (2004), “whether insane or simply cold-blooded and calculating, women who kill their children...subvert the social construction of ideal womanhood” (p. 235). It does not take much imagination to demonize this particular character. Her crime alone makes her the worst type of female offender on these dramas and this may be more than viewers want to see.

This particular study only begins to scratch the surface of understanding the media images of female offenders presented to the public. Examining other crime dramas may present us with a different view of the way female offenders are depicted. For example, including *Law & Order: Special Victim Unit* may lead to the discovery of other crime types and motivations not contained in the programs examined. It would also be useful to expand our knowledge by also exploring infotainment shows featuring female offenders, such as Oxygen Media’s *Snapped*, would also be useful since programs presenting real life cases and experiences are likely to be more legitimate in the minds of viewers than these fictionalized crime dramas. Each of type of media representation of female offenders can affect viewers’ perceptions, thus it is important to consider these images in totality.

Ignoring the realities of female offenders is damaging. Yet, these images would not be so detrimental if more accurate portrayals of female offenders were made available; however, similar images are pervasive throughout the media. It is critical that we find ways to project true images of female offenders so that the public is knowledgeable about the true nature of their criminal behavior and its causes. In the long run this information may contribute to the reformation of the system, including more support for gender-responsive programming and a repeal of harsh penalties for minor offenses. One way to do this is to follow Chesney-Lind’s (1999) advice. She believes that criminologists and others who study and work with female offenders need to find ways that let the media know “what we are doing and to speak about our work in language that they, and the general public, can understand” (p. 134). This information may then be incorporated into crime dramas. It is only then that people will be able to clearly differentiate between the reality of female offenders and the fictional reality created by the entertainment media.

## CONCLUSION

Prime time crime dramas, like Hollywood films, like to entertain viewers with violent women. By linking their crimes to romantic entanglements and motherhood, these programs present viewers with a feminized version of violent behavior that limits the threat of these women; however, there is a fine line between limiting the threat of the female offender and absolving her of responsibility. By focusing on unlikely motivations and atypical offenses, these crime dramas ensure that the audience still views these offenders as completely responsible for their behavior and deserving of punishment, thereby perpetuating the message that female offenders are bad and crime does not pay, even for women.

## ENDNOTE

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