

Gender in crime news:
A case study test of the chivalry hypothesis

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Abstract

This content analysis examined the chivalry hypothesis in six months of crime reporting in a local newspaper. This hypothesis posits that female criminals receive more lenient treatment in the criminal justice system and in news coverage of their crimes than their male counterparts. The study found partial support for the chivalry hypothesis and prompts a more nuanced formulation of the hypothesis—here termed patriarchal chivalry. This study also revealed a Bonnie and Clyde-effect: men and women collaborating in crime often received harsher news coverage than men or women acting alone in criminal pursuit.

Due to the deviance, drama and human consequences inherent in law-breaking activities, crime has potential for mythmaking and sensationalism unlike most other news topics. It is not surprising that for as long as mass media have existed, crime news has been a staple feature of print and broadcast content both in local and national markets. Media scholars show similar levels of interest in crime coverage and have studied crime reporting from many different angles. What is striking from examining this body of literature is that the gender of victims and criminals is typically examined as a secondary interest, if at all. Yet, crime stories offer a valuable opportunity to systematically observe gender politics. Gerbner, Gross, Signorelli, Morgan, and Jackson-Beeck (1979) argue that the media's portrayed repercussions of criminal actions often demonstrate power relations to society's members by communicating "who gets away with what against whom" (p. 181). Their work suggests that crime coverage must be studied within the patriarchal context in which it is produced and consumed, where some images of crime and gender are privileged over others.

In fiction and news, women have been shown to mostly appear as victims, not perpetrators, of crime. Research has therefore centered on the portrayal of their victimization. Some work in this vein demonstrates how the media's construction of female victimization (males are aggressive; females are passive) reinforces hegemonic discourses of gender (Chesney-Lind, 1999; Madriz, 1997). To date, however, there has been little work on the media's construction of female criminality. While the victimized woman doesn't pose a threat to patriarchal ideology, the female criminal sometimes does (Faith, 1993). The question remains if female criminals who violate gender norms and challenge patriarchy receive the same media treatment as their male counterparts.

The media's representation of female criminals became a matter of public debate in a small Midwestern community when the local chapter of The Commission on the Status of Women expressed concern about gender bias in the local newspaper's crime reporting. Motivated by both theoretical interest and the opportunity to inform this public debate, a content analysis was conducted to compare the coverage of male and female criminals in this local newspaper.

Prominence and sensationalism

When women are featured in mediated crimes they are typically over-represented as victims of crime (Chermak, 1995; Surette, 1998). This also holds true for news. Numerous studies have shown that television news (Entman, 1992; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Grabe, 1999; Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Kilgard & Craft, 1995; Whitney, Fritzler, Jones, Mazzearella, & Rakow, 1989) and newspapers (Davis, 1952; Naylor, 2001; Roshier, 1973; Smith, 1984) over-represent male criminality and victimization of females.¹ This prompts the first two hypotheses:

H1: Using FBI statistics as the baseline, women will be under-represented in the role of criminal and over-represented in the role of victim.

H2: Using FBI statistics as the baseline, men will be over-represented in the role of criminal and under-represented in the role of victim.

It is understandable that most research has focused on the portrayals of women in their most prominent role in crime stories, as victims of crime. Yet, it is reasonable to argue that their under-representation as lawbreakers deserves much-needed research attention. At the time of our study, few other published studies had done so. The study reported here will therefore primarily focus on gender portrayals of criminals, not victims. Moreover, assessing gender distributions through headcounts of criminals in crime reports, as proposed in the first two hypotheses, is an important first step in exploring gender differences in reporting. Yet, the structural features and narrative subtleties of reporting that impact the way criminals are framed cannot be addressed in looking at headcounts only. The placement of stories in a newspaper, headline size, and accompanying photographs or graphics have been shown to influence audience interpretations as well as their attention and memory for news. For example, Thorson (1995) has demonstrated the importance of visual material in facilitating information recall and also found that readers are more likely to read articles that are

accompanied by visual displays. Moreover, a large headline size and placement of an article as the lead story signals the prominence of a story and is often associated with sensationalism in reporting. For example, Francke (1978) refers to the lurid headlines of Yellow Journalism and the concocted illustrations of the 1920's tabloids to argue that visual features may contribute to what we identify as sensational journalism (see also Tannenbaum & Lynch, 1960). Variance in the prominence or relative sensationalism with which crimes committed by men and women are reported suggests gender bias. This leads to research question one:

RQ1: Is there variance in the prominence with which stories about male and female criminals are reported?

Crime type and the motivation behind the act

Existing research shows that crime type and the motivation for committing crime are important dimensions in probing the latent differences in how men and women criminals are framed in crime reporting. Weinmann and Fishman's (1988) study of Israel's leading dailies is the first to directly apply the "chivalry hypothesis" to print media coverage of crime. This hypothesis asserts that because women are viewed as weak and irrational, law enforcers and the criminal justice system treat them, across the board, in a more lenient manner (Anderson, 1976; Pollock, 1950). In recent decades, some studies have offered partial support for the chivalry hypothesis (Bernstein et al., 1979; Moulds, 1980), while others have challenged the idea (Farrington & Morris, 1983; Edwards, 1984; Eaton, 1986). Feminist criminologists have pointed out that chivalry is not equally bestowed to all female criminals (Chesney-Lind, 1999; Crew, 1991; Feinman, 1980; Kruttschnitt, 1982; Bernstein, Cardascia, & Ross, 1982; Morris, 1987; Rafter, 1990). Chesney-Lind (1978) asserts that "paternalism accrues only to women who conform to a sex role which requires their obedience to men, their passivity, and their acceptance of their status as the sexual property of only one man.

¹ The Naylor (2001) study is the exception, showing that the proportion of stories about women committing crimes to be higher than the proportion of crimes committed by men, according to police

Should they step outside of this boundary . . . chivalry is replaced by harsh exploitation and harassment ” (p. 204).

Work by feminist criminologists has demonstrated that it is the type of offense rather than the severity of the offense that determines how women are treated in the criminal justice system. Female criminals who commit unfeminine acts (e.g., behave violently or victimize children) are treated much more severely than their counterparts whose illegal activity conforms to the standards of womanhood (e.g., stealing food for one’s family). Petty crimes committed by women are therefore often overlooked, while violent women are vigorously punished and publicly demonized to serve as a cautionary tale to women about the risks associated with strategies of male violence (Chesney-Lind, 1999, pp. 133-134). The criminal justice system’s response toward women is therefore enforcing stereotypical female sex roles that perpetuate patriarchy (Birch, 1994; Chesney-Lind, 1986; Lloyd, 1995).

The media’s treatment of female criminals follow the same pattern. Weimann and Fishman (1988) concluded that the print media tended to be chivalrous toward female criminals because they present female offenses as a result of circumstantial factors beyond individual control, including being the pawns of male criminals (see also Steffensmeier, 1983). But, in line with findings by female criminologists, Weimann and Fishman (1988) discovered that the type of crime women committed significantly affected how they were treated in news coverage. For example, women who committed crimes against persons were not given “chivalrous” treatment by the media. Interestingly, Weimann and Fishman (1988) found that the explanatory narratives for male criminality tended to be more consistent across crime type, while the media treatment for female criminality was less stable. In a similar vein, Naylor (2001) found that violent women were often framed as irrational or emotional in the press and that some of the stories about “women taking power” were explained in

terms of wickedness. Naylor (2001) states that such stories must be considered within the broader “backlash” discourse about changes in women’s roles.

Thus, while petty crimes committed by women are often overlooked (or given “chivalrous” treatment) by the media, there has been a surge of increasingly harsh portrayals of violent female criminals (Ballinger, 1996; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Birch, 1994; Chesney-Lind, 1999; Faith, 1993; Faludi, 1991; Hasian & Flores, 2000; Lloyd, 1995; Perrone & Chesney-Lind, 1997). As Naylor suggested, these harsh portrayals began to emerge during the feminist “backlash” in the 1990’s (Chesney-Lind, 1999; Naylor 2001). Women who committed violent acts were demonized in news and film as “liberal crooks” whose actions were linked to “women’s liberation” (Chesney-Lind, 1999; Faith, 1993; Holmlund, 1994). Work by feminist historians, criminologists and communication scholars suggest that the representation of violent female criminals as “witches,” “demons” or “madwomen” often surface in times of patriarchal anxiety, when the need to control and discipline women is great.

Whether female criminals are portrayed as bad, mad, wicked or weak, they are cast outside the realm of normalcy. This casting is particularly true for women who commit violence in the context of intimate, caring relationships (Ballinger, 1996; Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Hasian & Flores, 2000; Morris & Wilczynski, 1993). Naylor (2001) contends that news producers treat the incidence of violent female criminality as the most deviant, anxiety-producing, and transgressive of all crime scenarios. Studies have shown that interpersonal crimes committed by women are consistently over-reported compared to official statistics (Naylor, 2001; Schlessinger, Tumber, & Murdock, 1991). Naylor (2001) also found that these interpersonal crimes committed by women were “more in need of explanation” than other stories because they radically challenged traditional conceptions of women.

Explanations for the motivation of criminal behavior are often embedded in crime news and fiction. Barrile (1986), Grabe (1999), and Haney and Manzolati (1981) showed that most crimes are

explained either in terms of individual or societal level causes. Existing research has also demonstrated that attributing the causes of crime to either individual or structural influences affects how viewers assign responsibility for the origins of crime (Iyengar, 1994). For example, individual motivations for crime such as greed, revenge, substance abuse and psychological instability provoke viewers to assign blame for crime to perpetrators, thereby intensifying the vilification of criminals. By ignoring possible structural causes for crime, such as poverty or racism, this individualized or personalized perspective frames criminals as society's enemies who deserve little sympathy because they presumably act as a result of their own fault or will (Barrile, 1986). In Durkheim's view (1933), this supposedly self-interested or individually flawed behavior that violates the common morality of society's members provokes a shared outrage against the individual criminal and not against societal institutions. By contrast socio-structural causes for crime, including racism, political and economic alienation, poverty, and sexism put the blame on social institutions, not individuals, and therefore subtly absolve criminals, at least partially, from their transgressions.

It is noteworthy that existing studies show that the vast majority of crimes reported in news and portrayed in fiction are explained in terms of individual motivations such as substance abuse, greed, jealousy, rage, laziness, psychological instability, or revenge (Barrile, 1980, 1986; Grabe, 1999; Haney & Manzolari, 1981). The FBI's uniform crime reports provide limited insights into the causes of crime. Yet, there are indications that individual causes of crime play a remarkably small role in motivating criminal behavior. For example, only about 6% of murders are motivated by greed and 5% are committed because of revenge (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000).

Crimes that have been committed by women who are framed as "wicked" are typically explained in terms of individual factors (Berrington & Honkatukia, 2002; Chesney-Lind, 1999). Susan Smith, who murdered her children, for example, was portrayed by the prosecutor and the media as a "selfish" woman. Social factors (e.g., sexual abuse) that might have helped explain Smith's actions were downplayed. Hasian and Flores's (2000) study of the media representation of

Smith concluded that she was transformed into “a modern Medea, an iconic reminder of what awaited other women who violated the laws of ‘motherhood’”(p. 163).

Similar to the criminal justice system, the media might engage in “patriarchal-chivalry” that reinforces stereotypical female sex roles. Under this system, women who commit crimes that don’t threaten patriarchal ideology or whose acts can be explained in a way that doesn’t threaten patriarchal ideology receive so-called lenient media treatment, which means they are usually labeled as “mad” or “pawns.” On the other hand, women who commit crimes that radically challenge gender roles receive unforgiving media treatment. To test this hypothesis of “patriarchal-chivalry,” the following hypotheses were formulated:

H3: Women who commit crimes that violate gender expectations by committing violent crimes and crimes against children will receive harsher media treatment (more prominent coverage that is framed as the result of individual flaws) than female criminals who do not violate gender expectations in committing crime.

H4: Women who commit crimes that violate gender expectations by committing violent crimes and crimes against children will receive harsher media treatment (more prominent coverage that is framed as the result of individual flaws) than male criminals who commit the same crimes.

H5: Women who commit nonviolent crimes that conform to the standards of womanhood will receive more lenient treatment by the media than male criminals who commit the same crimes.

Method

A six-month (November 1, 2001, to April 30, 2002) census of *The Herald Times* was analyzed. This daily newspaper is the primary source of local news in Bloomington, Indiana, which has no local televised newscasts. The circulation, of this newspaper is 33,000 on weekdays in a city of 61,000 residents. A faculty member, two doctoral students, and one undergraduate student at a Midwestern university collaborated in conducting this study.

The individual crime story was the primary unit of analysis in this study. Within stories the

crime, criminal, victims and dimensions of reporting were scrutinized. A crime story was defined as one that featured violent or non-violent crime, excluding minor offenses such as traffic violations and city ordinance violations. Criminals were defined as those who were suspected, arrested, charged, on trial, or sentenced in connection with a committed crime. Thus, criminal justice procedures did not have to be completed before the subject was coded as a criminal in this study. Only current crimes were analyzed. Therefore, coders were instructed to regard all previous crimes or convictions as background information. The codebook defined “current crime” as those offenses that initiated the published report.

A total of 2,281 crime stories were identified for analysis from the 179 editions of *The Herald Times*. The newspaper was not delivered on December 25 or January 1; therefore, these dates were not included in the sample. The coders selected and analyzed every crime-related article from the Main and Region sections of the paper, including police beats and court news briefings.

It is important to note that two major newsworthy events occurred during the sampling period of this study. Coverage of molestation charges against Catholic priests developed in January 2002 and related stories frequently appeared in *The Herald Times* through the remaining months of the sampling period. In addition, the sample includes coverage on the September 11 attacks. These incidents had the potential to disproportionately impact the content of the newspapers under investigation. Yet, in order to temper the impact of these two stories, the research team took care in selecting for analysis articles that involved criminal charges. Stories about the moral rather than criminal dimensions of the church scandal were eliminated from the analysis. Coverage of the September 11 attacks was included in the analysis only when it centrally dealt with criminal justice procedures.

Coding instrument:

To address the first two hypotheses coders documented the distribution of gender across criminal and victim categories by scrutinizing the body of text and every headline for demographic

information. Coders documented the number of female and male victims mentioned in the text of each article. The gender of victims was accounted for only if they could be clearly identified as male or female, and coders had the option of circling “victims not identified or identifiable.” This option was available if the story did not mention or identify all victims, if the story made non-gendered reference to victims, or if victims mentioned in the story were unbounded or undetermined (e.g., victims of a computer virus). The same information was gathered for all criminals mentioned in stories.

To answer research question one, crime stories were analyzed for their prominence in the paper by coding their position in the newspaper, headline font size and length, presence of graphics or photos with the stories, and duration of coverage. Gender references in the headline were also recorded. To specifically determine the prominence of crime stories in the paper, six categories were designed. Coders documented the placement of stories: on the front page above the fold, below the fold, or in the inside pages of the newspaper. Coders also recorded how often crime was the lead story,² appearing in the main section of the newspaper and accompanied by a photograph or graphic. The number of words in headlines was counted and the font size used for these headlines was recorded in millimeters. Finally, coders counted the number of days a crime story received coverage in the paper. Coders reviewed all of the newspapers to determine how often a specific story received coverage. Duration of coverage is an indicator of the importance that a newspaper attaches to a specific story. These prominence features, especially font size of headlines, provide some level of insight into sensationalism in crime reporting.

To add to the assessment of sensationalism, coders rated on a three-point scale how graphic (1=not graphic, 2=somewhat graphic, and 3=very graphic) the details reported in violent crime stories

² According to the codebook, a story was considered the lead if it appeared on the front page, above the fold, and with a significantly larger headline font size than any of the surrounding articles. Although many lead stories include a picture or graphic, coders were instructed not to categorize a story with a photo as the lead story simply because the photo adds more visual “weight.”

were. Rating a story as “1” (not graphic) meant there was no description of how the violence was committed—the reporter merely stated that someone perpetrated the violent crime. A rating of “2” (somewhat graphic) meant words such as brutal, senseless, gruesome, were used to describe the act(s) of violence. Not enough detail was included to prompt visualization of how the crime was committed, but there was a general and subtle suggestion that the act would provoke a visceral response from most readers. When coders assigned a “3” (very graphic) to a violent crime story it meant that the requirements for a 2 rating were exceeded. For example, there was description of how blood covered the floor, how many times someone was stabbed, or that the neck was severed. Thus, enough detail was reported to provoke specific and potentially disturbing visual images of the crime. The research team was conservative in labeling a story “very graphic”; an example of a story that earned the “very graphic” label noted that the criminal had skinned her partner’s body and carved it up to serve to their children.³

Gender references in the headline were also coded. Because police-beat and court-news stories often did not include a headline, a “no headline” option was available within these categories. The coders were trained to pay attention to gendered words that may appear in the headline that could help to determine the sex of criminals or victims; these include husband, wife, mother, father, son, and daughter. Alternate options, such as “no gender mentioned,” “unclear,” or “unknown” were provided as options within these categories. This study also investigated if collaboration between genders was a common theme in crime coverage. To determine if one gender received more focus when a male and female collaborated in crime, the headline of such stories were examined. Two categories with yes/no/not applicable options were used. The first recorded incidents in which the female was mentioned in the headline and a male was not; the other when a male was mentioned in the headline and a female was not.

For the purpose of answering hypotheses three through five, the violent or nonviolent nature of

³ *The Herald Times*, “Woman Jailed for Butchering Partner,” November 9, 2001.

the crime (using standard FBI categories), the reported motivation (if any) for the crime, and the presence of a child victim were recorded. Coders identified the nature of crime(s) discussed in each story as: only violent, only non-violent, both violent and non-violent, or other. A crime was considered violent if it involved conduct that presents serious risk or potential injury to another and/or where great physical force has been used to injure, damage or threaten the physical well-being of another. A crime was considered non-violent if it involved illegal behavior that doesn't injure, damage or threaten the physical well-being of another. The FBI index of violent and non-violent crimes served as a guide to define violent and non-violent crime. If a crime could not be deemed either violent or non-violent, coders selected the "other" option; for example, suicide is a crime that doesn't fit the standard definition of violent and non-violent crime. Coders also evaluated each story for reported explanations for criminal motivations; the options for this category were: social, individual, both, or unclear. Care was taken not to rely on implied motivations for crime but to rather record manifest statements in news reports.

Finally, the coding instrument probed the gender of the criminal in cases where a crime was committed against a child. Options for this category were: male, female and both genders. In addition, coders could select "unknown" or "other" in the event that a criminal was not identified in a story with a child as the victim. If the crime was victimless (such as drinking or drug use), the coders used the "victimless crime" response. Many crimes did not include children as victims; therefore, a "no child" option was also available.

Reliability:

In order to obtain uniformity among the research team, a codebook was constructed to serve as a detailed guide for analyzing crime stories. After training sessions and practice coding stories not included in the study's sample, revisions and clarifications were made to the instrument. A coder reliability pre-test produced unacceptably low agreement (Krippendorff's Alpha = .72), so further adjustments to the coding instrument and more training ensued. Another pretest on a series of surplus

stories produced acceptable agreement among coders (Krippendorff's Alpha = .85) and data collection began. Ten percent of the sample was subjected to a reliability post-test, yielding agreement among the three coders at an acceptable level of 82%.

Results

Gender distribution of criminals and victims:⁴

There was a clear tendency in *The Herald Times* crime reporting to over-represent women as victims and under-represent them as criminals. The inverse is true for men: they were under-represented as victims and over-represented as criminals. These findings lend support for hypotheses one and two. The gender of 2,214 criminals was identified across all stories. About 16% of these criminals were women; 84% were men. According to FBI (2000) statistics, women make up about 21.8% of persons arrested, whereas men comprise 78.2% of that population. At the same time, the gender of 1,300 victims of crime was identified across all stories. Of these, 46.31% were women-- 53.69% were men. According to FBI crime statistics, women make up about 44% and men 56% of all victims of personal crime (FBI, 2000).

Prominence and sensationalism:⁵

To answer research question one, which probed the relative sensationalism in covering men and women criminals, a number of analyses were performed. Cross-tabulations between the gender of the criminal and variables measuring sensationalism produced a startling finding that we termed the Bonnie and Clyde effect. Stories of men and women collaborating in crime received more

⁴ In the body of text of crime stories in *The Herald Times*, men were presented as criminals in 64.7% of cases whereas 10.9% of stories featured exclusively women criminals. About 3% (68 stories) involved crimes in which men and women collaborated, while in 21.2% of the cases no criminal was identified.

⁵ The results of this study show that *The Herald Times* follows in the tradition of prominently featuring crime news. Of the 2,281 crime stories identified in this sample, a majority (73.5%) appeared in the main section of the paper. Around 26.5% of the crime stories were drawn from the region or local section. Only 1.2% of the crime stories coded ran as lead stories. About 2.4% of the crime stories appeared on the front page above the fold, and 1.1% appeared on the front page below the fold. The bulk of the crime stories came from the inside pages of the main or regional sections (96.5%). A photo or graphic accompanied 7.5% of crime stories. It should be noted that 51.2% of the stories in the sample were featured in the police column. These reports often did not include some of the journalistic features, such as headlines or photos. The average number of words in crime story headlines was 6.21 (minimum = 2; maximum = 16), and the average font size used for these headlines was 6.26 millimeters (minimum = 2; maximum = 21).

sensational coverage than stories in which men and women criminals acted independent of each other. When men and women teamed up in crime the newspaper was more likely to feature a report in the main section,⁶ on the front page⁷, as the lead story⁸, and accompanied by a photo⁹ than when criminals acted without an inter-gender alliance. Figure 1 depicts this phenomenon graphically.

--Insert Figure 1 here--

The results of a one-way ANOVA test on ratio-level variables further support that the collaboration between men and women in crime enjoyed the most prominent coverage. From Figure 1 it is clear that stories in which men and women collaborated in crime also received the highest ratings across ratio variables.¹⁰ Thus, inter-gender alliance in committing crime is statistically associated with the largest font size and number of words in headlines, as well as more days of coverage, and more graphic description of the crime in the report. By isolating incidents in which men and women acted criminally without an alliance, nominal and ratio data show that the newspaper did not favor one gender over the other.

As for gender mentions in the headline of stories,¹¹ women criminals were more likely to be identified by gender in the headline than male criminals. The results show that 17.4% of stories that featured male criminals made reference to their gender in the headline. By contrast, 22.89% of stories exclusively about female criminals referenced their gender in the headline. One of the most obvious areas of gender inequality in reporting occurred when men and women collaborated in crime, but only one of them was mentioned in the headline. This occurrence was rare—less than 1% of total cases—but when it happened, the female criminal (29%) was about six times more likely to be

⁶ Gender alliance=74%; Men=70.9%; Women=69.1%.

⁷ Gender alliance=10.3%; Men=3.6%; Women=2.8%.

⁸ Gender alliance=1.5%; Men=1.3%; Women=1.2%.

⁹ Gender alliance=22.1%; Men=7.2%; Women=7.7%.

¹⁰ Font size of headline $F(2,1792) = 38.80, p < .0001$; number of words in headline $F(2,1792) = 41.57, p < .001$; days of coverage $F(2,1792) = 17.63, p < .001$; graphic details $F(2,1792) = 17.83, p < .001$.

¹¹ Criminals were more likely to be identified by gender than victims. In fact, of the stories that contained headlines, approximately 4% mentioned the victim's gender in the headline, whereas around 14% made reference to the gender of criminals.

mentioned than the male criminal (5%). The “Los Angeles dog mauling” case illustrates this phenomenon. One headline read, “Women convicted of murder in dog mauling” even though Marjorie Knollwer, 46, and her 60-year-old-husband, Robert Noel, were both convicted on the manslaughter charge.¹²

Crime type and the motivation behind the act:

Hypothesis three predicted that women who commit violent crimes¹³ and crimes against children¹⁴ will receive harsher media treatment (more prominent coverage and their behavior would be framed as the result of individual flaws) than women criminals who do not act violently or commit crimes against children. To compare the relative harshness with which violent and non-violent female criminals and those who did and did not perpetrate crimes against children were presented in *The Herald Times* two statistical procedures were employed. First, T-tests were conducted on four ratio variables: font size in the headline, number of words in the headline, number of days a story was covered, and a rating of how graphic the description of violence was in the crime report. Second, crosstabs were performed on nominal-level data, which included another five variables focusing on the location of crime stories in the newspaper, the presence of photos with the article, and the reported motivation for the crime. The results are graphically depicted in Figure 2.

--Insert Figure 2 here--

Women who commit violent crimes received harsher journalistic treatment in *The Herald Times* than women who committed non-violent crimes. T-tests reveal that violent female criminals received more days of coverage ($M=1.56$ versus $M=1.06$)¹⁵, headlines were longer ($M=3.53$ versus

¹² *The Herald Times*, March 22, 2002. A4.

¹³ Of all crime reports, 43.2% featured violence, 55.7% were exclusively about non-violent crimes, and 1.1% of stories were recorded in the “other” category that indicates that the reported crime could not be appropriately coded as either violent or non-violent.

¹⁴ Children were the victims of crime in 10.9% of all crime stories.

¹⁵ $T=6.41$; $p<.001$, $df=243$

M=1.41)¹⁶, and the font size of headlines (M=3.66 versus M=1.30)¹⁷ was larger than for non-violent female criminals.¹⁸ Crosstab analysis for nominal variables echoes this pattern. Stories about women who committed violent crimes were more than nine times (6.5%) as likely to appear on the front page of the newspaper than stories about women who committed non-violent crimes (.7%). Coverage of women who committed violent crimes was also more likely to be the lead story¹⁹, featured in the main section of the paper²⁰, and accompanied by a photo²¹ than coverage of women who committed non-violent crime. Finally, by looking at the reported motivations for violent and non-violent crime, it becomes clear that when women perpetrated violent crime, thus defying stereotypical expectations of nurturing behavior, they were more likely to be framed as self-interested criminals than when they commit non-violent crimes (see Figure 2). Cross-tabulations revealed that 28% of the violent crimes that women reportedly committed were journalistically framed as a result of individual-level impetus such as greed, revenge, substance abuse, and psychological instability. Only 5.9% of non-violent crimes committed by female criminals were embedded in this framework. Societal motivations for crime, such as poverty or institutional inequity, were used once to explain a violent crime and twice to explain non-violent crimes committed by women. It is also clear that when women committed violent crime, reporters were more likely (35.6%) to provide motivations for the crime than when women committed non-violent crime (7.2%). This suggests that journalists are in the habit of explaining the violent behavior of women criminals more often than their non-violent criminal behavior.

When it comes to coverage of women who did and did not commit crimes against children,

¹⁶ T=5.70; p<.001, df=243

¹⁷ T=5.51; p<.001, df=243

¹⁸ The variable that involves ratings for the graphic nature of the crime report was not used for this analysis because it applies to violent crime only.

¹⁹ 2.2% of violent crime and .7% of non-violent crime committed by women were lead stories.

²⁰ 82.8% of violent crime and 59.9% of nonviolent crime committed by women were featured in the main section of the paper.

²¹ 14% of reported violent crimes and 2.6% of non-violent crimes committed by women were accompanied by a photograph.

further support for patriarchal chivalry emerged. All four ratio variables produced statistically significant differences in the predicted direction. When women committed crimes against children they received harsher treatment in the media than women who committed violent and non-violent crime in which children are not victims. Specifically, there are more days of coverage ($M=1.84$ versus $M=1.22$)²², the font size ($M=5.02$ versus $M=2.70$)²³ and number of words ($M=5.02$ versus $M=2.81$)²⁴ in the headlines increased, and reporting became more graphic ($M=1.31$ versus $M=.76$)²⁵ in detail for women who committed crimes against children compared to those who did not commit crimes against children. Nominal variables reveal the same pattern. Stories about women perpetrating crime against children were more likely to appear on the front page of the newspaper (7.8% versus 3%), with a photograph (23.5% versus 4.5%) and were more regularly featured as the lead story (3.9% versus 0%) and in the main section of the paper (84.3% versus 70.1%) than stories about women criminals who did not perpetrate crime against children. Finally, crimes against children (51%) were more likely to be explained as having a cause than crimes against adult victims (20.9%). It is also clear that women who commit crimes against children were more likely to be framed as acting because of individual flaws (43.1%) than women who do not commit crime against children (14.9%). At the same time, woman who commit crime against children were never framed as motivated by societal causes while the societal frame was evoked in 3% of stories about women who did not perpetrate crime against children. Because all variables produced results in the predicted direction, hypothesis three is accepted: women criminals who violate gender expectations (commit violent crime or victimize children) received harsher media treatment than women criminals who did not violate stereotypes about female behavior.

Hypothesis four predicted that women who commit violent crimes and crimes against children

²² $T=4.28$; $p<.001$, $df=116$

²³ $T=3.32$; $p<.001$, $df=116$

²⁴ $T=4.05$; $p<.001$, $df=116$

²⁵ $T=4.57$; $p<.001$, $df=116$

will receive harsher media treatment (more prominent coverage and their behavior would be framed as the result of individual flaws) than male criminals who commit the same crimes. To compare the prominence with which violent men and women criminals and those who committed crimes against children were presented in *The Herald Times*, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted on four ratio variables (font size of headline, number of words in headline, number of days the story was covered, rating of how graphic the description of violence was). Both crime types (violent and against children) were also investigated through nominal-level data, which included another five variables that focused on the location of crime stories in the newspaper, the presence of photos with the article, and the reported motivation for the crime.

First, for violent crime, all four ratio variables produced statistically significant differences across gender options. The Bonnie and Clyde effect re-emerged as the most prominent dimension (see Figure 3). Yet, by isolating violent men and women who acted alone, it becomes clear that men received harsher treatment than women in all but one measure. To be specific, in the opposite direction than what was predicted, the font size was larger ($F(3, 982)=8.25; p<.001$)²⁶, there were more words ($F(3, 982)=12.53; p<.001$)²⁷ in the headlines, and the graphic nature of reporting was rated higher ($F(3, 982)=6.76; p<.001$)²⁸ for crime news stories in which men were the perpetrators of violent crime. Yet, in the predicted direction, there were more days of coverage ($F(3, 982)=4.43; p<.004$)²⁹ when women committed violent crime.

--Insert Figure 3 here--

Coverage of violent crime was also comparatively looked at through cross-tabulations for gender. These include where the crime story appeared (front page or not, main section or not), whether it was the lead story or not, if the story was accompanied by a photo or graphic, and the

²⁶ Collaboration: M= 6.96; men: M=4.40; women: M=3.66

²⁷ Collaboration: M= 6.64; men: M=4.38; women: M=3.53

²⁸ Collaboration: M= 1.51; men: M=1.28; women: M=1.27

²⁹ Collaboration: M= 1.69; men: M=1.36; women: M=1.56

reported motivation for the crime. In this analysis a consistent pattern in support of hypothesis four surfaced. Violent crime committed by women enjoyed more prominence in coverage and was more likely to be framed as the result of individually driven deviance than violent male criminality.

Violent crime was more likely to be featured on the front page of the newspaper when women (6.5%) committed it than men (4.8%). Interestingly, when men and women collaborated in crime, it appeared on the front page of the newspaper in 8.8% of cases. The newspaper was also more likely to feature female (82.8%) than male (73.3%) violence in the main section of the paper. It was also slightly more likely that a story of about a violent female (2.2%) than male (2.1%) criminal was positioned as the lead story. Finally, photographs were more likely to be featured with stories about violent female (14%) than male (12%) criminals. Interestingly, 31% of stories about men and women collaborating in crime were accompanied by a photo or graphic. It therefore appears that overall, violent female criminals received more prominent coverage than violent male criminals.

Comparisons of the reported motivations for male and female acts of violent crime lend further support for this pattern of gender stereotyping. When women committed violent crime they were almost twice as likely as men to be framed as acting in self-interest. In fact, 15.7% of the violent crimes males committed compared to 28% of violent crimes committed by women were framed as the result of individual-level motivations. Although few crimes were explained in terms of societal level causes, the violent behavior of men (2.1%) more often received a societal-level explanation than women (1.1%).

Overwhelmingly, in stories featuring women (92.8%) and men (91.1%) who committed non-violent crime, reporters did not offer a clear motivation for the offense. Yet, when it comes to violent crime, reporters were more likely to present clear-cut motivations for the act when women committed it than when men were criminally violent. In fact, the absence of an explanation for violent crime occurred in 64.5% of the stories featuring female criminals; 77.8% of stories about violent crime committed by male perpetrators did not offer a reason for the act. This finding suggests that journalists deemed female violence as more in need of explanation than male violence.

Hypothesis four found strong support in the analysis of crimes committed against children (see Figure 4). Indeed, this study offers evidence that women who harm children received harsher treatment in *The Herald Times* than men who committed the same offense. This finding is in line with the argument that when women violate their socially assigned role as unconditional nurturers of children, public response is less forgiving than when men breach this threshold.

--Insert Figure 4 here--

Overall, around 7% of crime stories involved men who committed crime against children. It is important to remember that the child molestation scandal in the Catholic Church was prominent in the media at this time. This story probably pushed the number of stories about men victimizing children beyond what is typical in the news, which provided an important opportunity to make gender comparisons. Females committed only 2.4% of crimes against children. While women were reportedly less likely to commit crime against children, when they did, the coverage of their crimes was less-forgiving than when men did so. One-way ANOVA's and cross-tabulation analyses produced several results to show this tendency and the results are graphically depicted in Figure 4. All four ratio variables were significant, in the predicted direction. Stories about women ($M=1.80$) who committed crimes against children received more days of coverage than stories about men ($M=1.43$) who committed the same offense.³⁰ Moreover, the description of crime was evaluated as more graphic for stories in which women ($M=1.29$) than men ($M=1.28$) committed crimes against children.³¹ At the same time the font size was larger ($M=5.18$ versus $M=4.76$)³² and there were more words ($M=5.07$ versus $M=4.78$)³³ in the headline of stories about women who committed crimes against children. It is again important to point out that despite the gender differences, in three of the four ratio variables (font size, number of words in the headline, and rating of how graphic coverage

³⁰ $F(3, 2281)=29.85; p<.001$

³¹ $F(3, 2281)=101.91; p<.001$

³² $F(3, 2281)=28.26; p<.001$

³³ $F(3, 2281)=35.10; p<.001$

was) collaboration between men and women in committing crime against children produced the highest means. It was only for the number of days of coverage that women criminals topped male criminals or inter-gender alliance in crime against children.

Crime coverage of crimes committed against children was also examined through five categorical variables, showing a strong pattern of women receiving harsher coverage for committing such crime than men. When women committed crimes against children, their crimes were more likely to appear on the front page than men's. In fact, 7.2% of stories about women who committed crime against children appeared on the front page. By contrast, 4.3% of such stories that featured a male criminal appeared on the front page. When a woman committed a crime against a child, it was more likely to run as a lead story (3.6%) than when a man did so (1.9%). Almost 84% of stories about female criminals who harmed children appeared in the main section of the paper whereas 67% of stories with men perpetrating a crime against a child were placed there. Stories featuring women victimizing children were about one-and-a-half times (21.8% vs. 14.9%) more likely to have a photo accompany the story than when males committed the same offense. Again, the presence of the Bonnie and Clyde was evident in one of the four categorical variables: reports about women and men collaborating (33.3%) in crime against children were more likely to be accompanied by a photo than reports of men (14.9%) and women (21.8%) acting alone. Finally, the crimes that women committed against children were more frequently framed as being motivated by individual, rather than societal factors. In fact, approximately 41.8% of the stories about women committing crimes against children were framed as individually motivated while 16.1% of the stories about men committing crimes against children were framed this way.

Only 2.1% of stories about crimes against children explained the offense as a result of societal-level influences, whereas 11% featured individual level causes for the crime. Both societal- and individual-level explanations for crime were found in 2.8% of the stories. In 84.1% of stories the motivation for crime was not reported. Overall, crimes against children committed by women

(14.5%) were slightly more likely than those by men (11.6%) to be presented as the result of individual or self-interested causes. Societal level explanations for crime against children were presented with the same frequency for both genders--at 1.2% of crime stories. Six of the nine variables for violent crime and for crime against children showed that women received harsher treatment than men. This pattern lends partial support of hypothesis four: women who commit violent crime and crime against children receive harsher media coverage than men who commit the same crimes.

Hypothesis five predicted that women who commit nonviolent crimes and crimes in which children are not the victims, thereby conforming to the stereotypical standards of womanhood, will receive more lenient treatment in the media than male criminals who commit the same type of crimes. There is strong support for this hypothesis. For non-violent crime men were consistently, across three ratio variables, presented with more prominence than women who committed non-violent crime. In fact, the font size³⁴ and number of words³⁵ of the headlines for stories about non-violent male crime were larger than for women. Moreover, there were more days of coverage³⁶ of males who committed non-violent crime than women who committed the same types of crime. The fourth ratio variable that involves the level of graphic description in crime coverage was not applicable here because it was coded for violent crime only(see Figure 5).

--Insert Figure 5 here--

Of the five nominal-level variables used in this study to assess the relative harshness of coverage, four showed chivalry towards women. Non-violent crime committed by men were more likely to appear on the front page (2.4% versus .7%), in the main section (68.4% versus 59.9%) of the newspaper, and accompanied by a photo (3.3% versus 2.6%). Non-violent crime received equally little prominence as lead stories across gender (men = .6% versus women = .7%). The reported

³⁴ F(3, 1268)=19.772; p<.001. M for men = 1.98; M for women = 1.30

³⁵ F(3, 1268)=18.45; p<.001. M for men = 1.94; M for women = 1.41

motivation for non-violent crime produced strong evidence of chivalrous treatment of women. First, focusing on individual motivations for crime, men (7.8%) were more likely to be framed as motivated by self-interest than women (5.9%). The reverse is true for societal-level motivations for crime. Women (1.3%) who committed non-violent crime were more likely to be framed as acting because of societal influences than men (.4%).

It is important to note that for non-violent crime the Bonnie and Clyde effect surfaced again with great prominence. The collaboration of men and women in non-violent crime received by far the most prominent coverage across all but the presence of a photo variable. Not a single article about men and women teaming up in committing non-violent crime was printed with a photo. Also noteworthy is the fact that not a single collaborative non-violent criminal act was framed as motivated by societal-level problems.

When it comes to crime in which children were not the victims, the same pattern of chivalry towards women emerged, lending further support to hypothesis five (see Figure 6).

--Insert Figure 6 here--

Across four ratio variables men received harsher journalistic treatment than women. The headline size³⁷ and number of words³⁸ in the headlines of stories about men who committed crime exceeded that of women criminals. There were also more days of coverage³⁹ for men who committed crimes in which children were not the victims and the graphic descriptions⁴⁰ of the committed crimes topped that of women in this category. Results from the analysis of nominal variables reaffirm this pattern. Although stories in which men and women committed crimes in which children were not the victims received the same prominence (both 3%) on the front page of the paper, reports about male criminals were more likely to be featured in the main section (75.3% versus 70.1%) and as the lead

³⁶ $F(3, 1268)=12.62$; $p<.001$. M for men = 1.08; M for women = 1.05

³⁷ $F(3, 1193)=26.55$; $p<.001$. M for men = 4.41; M for women = 2.70

³⁸ $F(3, 1193)=32.76$; $p<.001$. M for men = 4.36; M for women = 2.81

³⁹ $F(3, 1193)=7.30$; $p<.001$. M for men = 1.33; M for women = 1.22

story (2.0% versus 0%) than women criminals who fell into this category. Reports about crime in which children were not the victims also were more likely to be accompanied by a photo when perpetrated by men (12.1%) than women (4.5%) criminals. Reported causes for crime also produced evidence in support of hypothesis five. Individual motivations for crime, in which children were not the victims, were more likely to be associated with male (17.1%) than female (14.9%) perpetrators. This bias reverses for societal motivations for crime in which children were not the victims: women (3%) were more likely to be framed as committing crime because of societal-level causes than men (1.6%).

The Bonnie and Clyde effect also emerged from this analysis of crime in which children were not the victims. Across all four ratio variables, the means for gender collaboration in crime surpassed means for men and women criminals acting individually. Nominal variables produced similar results. Inter-gender collaboration in crimes not committed against children was more likely to appear on the front page, accompanied by a photo, and be framed as an outcome of individual causes than such crime committed by men and women individually. Yet, there were no lead stories about gender collaboration. Gender collaboration (73.7%) in crime was more likely to be featured in the main section than when women (70.1%) committed such crime, but less likely than when men (75.3%) were the perpetrators.

Conclusion

In line with most studies of crime reporting, crimes committed by women were slightly under-reported in *The Herald Times* while the crimes committed by men were over-reported (in comparison to FBI statistics on the percentage of crimes committed by women in the general population). There was also exaggerated emphasis on women as victims, while the victimization of men was underplayed. Although the gender of female criminals was more likely to be cited in headlines than the gender of male criminals, this study did not find evidence of overall gender bias in the text of

⁴⁰ $F(3, 1193)=66.85; p<.001$. M for men = .98; M for women = .76

crime reports.

Gender bias made a strong showing when violent crimes and crimes committed against children were looked at more closely. In fact, this case study of *The Herald Times* offers evidence in support of the chivalry hypothesis. Women who committed crimes, but in doing so behaved in accordance with their socially imposed role as gentle and unconditional nurturers of children, received more lenient treatment than men who committed comparable crimes. Yet, journalistic chivalry toward female criminality has its limits: Not all crimes were treated equally in crime reporting. When women violated society's expected gender norms by acting violently or committing crimes against children) they received harsher treatment than men who committed the same crime and women who committed crime but did not violate these gender stereotypes. In this sense our findings align with those of Naylor (2001), Weimann and Fishman (1988), and Schlesinger, Tumber and Murdock (1991), and we call for a more nuanced formulation of the chivalry hypothesis to acknowledge its patriarchal dimensions. This study shows that wholesale chivalry does not exist in crime reporting--but it is generously applied to female criminals who do not challenge the patriarchal social order.

Gender stereotyping as revealed in this study can affect socialization processes, coaching that adherence to dominant gender norms is rewarded, while deviance from it is punished. Moreover, the documented influence of crime coverage on public anxiety is also linked to political action and pressure on authorities for policy solutions (Schlessinger & Tumber, 1994). Media coverage that sensationalizes female criminals as dangerous, transgressive, and irrational may result in negative and undesirable social consequences, such as justification for violence against women.

Although the study provided evidence to fuel concerns about gender inequity in crime reporting, some of the most significant findings pertain to the journalistic treatment of crimes in which men and women collaborated. Overall, these cases prompted the most prominent coverage and were defined as the Bonnie and Clyde effect. Perhaps gender collaboration in crime enjoyed the most

prominent coverage because it disturbs behavioral expectations for both genders, thereby offering potential for journalistic titillation. The stereotype of the testosterone-driven male criminal might be upset by the idea of a female accomplice. At the same time, the inter-gender alliance in committing crime reverses the role of women in crime stories. In fact, across news and fiction, women are most likely to appear in the role of a victim—to a male criminal. A female criminal side-by-side with a male criminal offers an unusual story, which was played up in the packaging of news in this local newspaper.

This study's findings are limited to one local newspaper in the Midwest. Applying this coding instrument to other papers, and perhaps, in revised form, to television news would certainly add to its external validity. Yet, a focused case study enabled an in-depth examination of the chivalry hypothesis within a media context. This study might also soften criticism of content analysis. This methodology has been described as impotent in detecting latent ideological meanings because of its inherent emphasis on manifest content (Baehr & Gray, 1995). As this analysis shows, content analysis can fulfill traditional scientific requirements while also digging below the surface to reveal gender politics.

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Figure 1: Gender differences in prominence of reported crimes

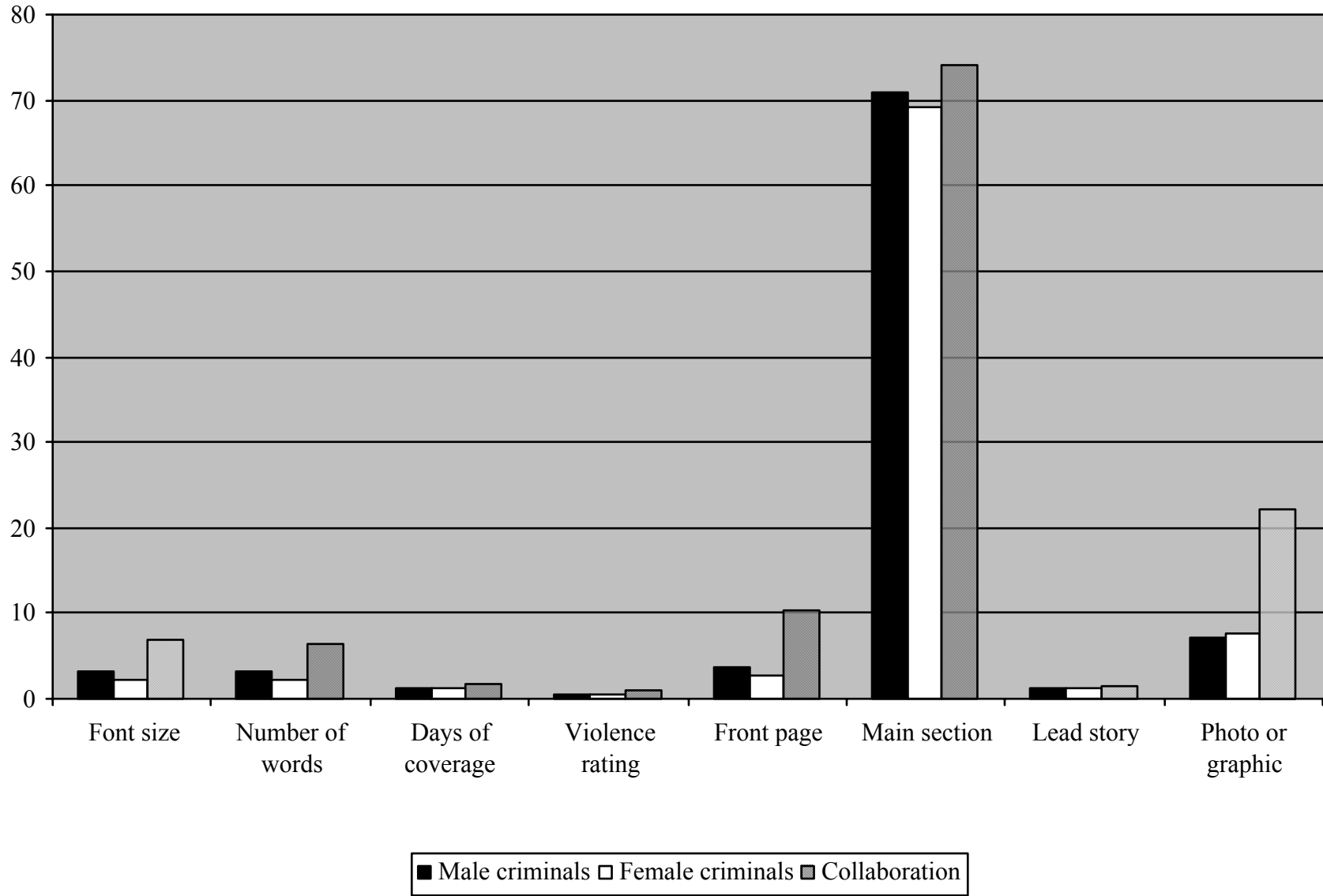


Figure 2: Violence and child victims in reported crimes committed by women

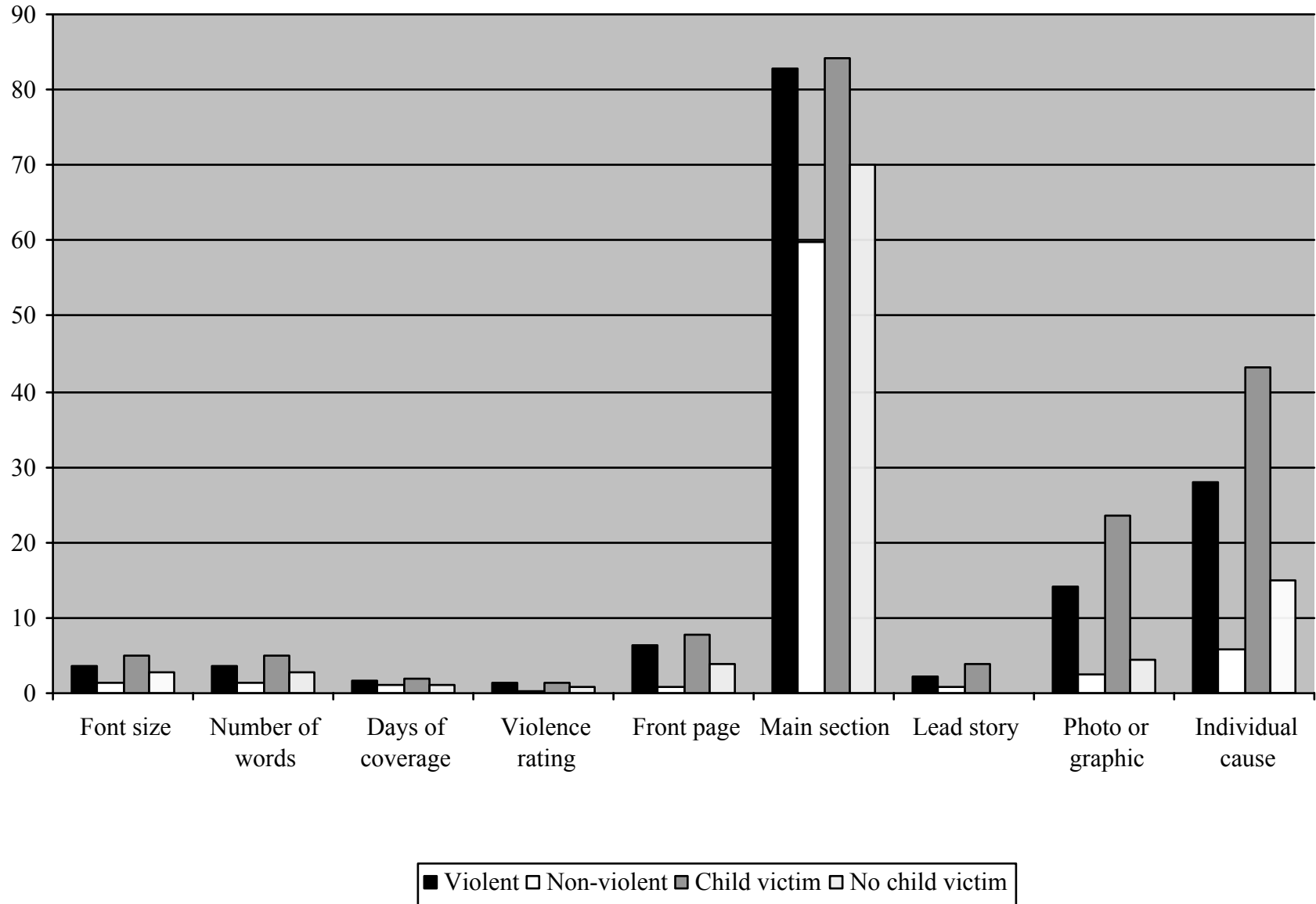


Figure 3: Gender differences in reported violent crime

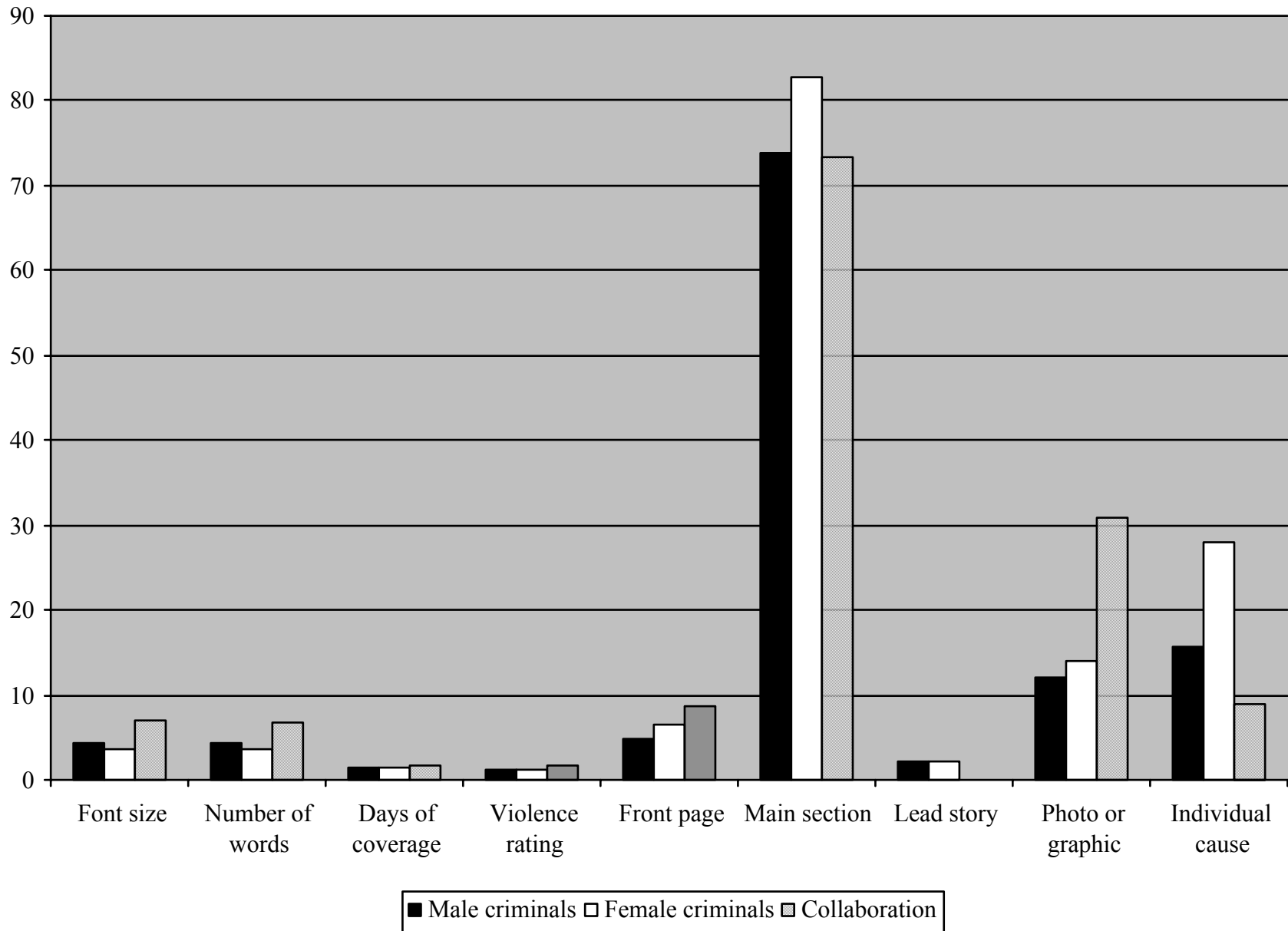


Figure 4: Gender differences in reported crimes committed against children

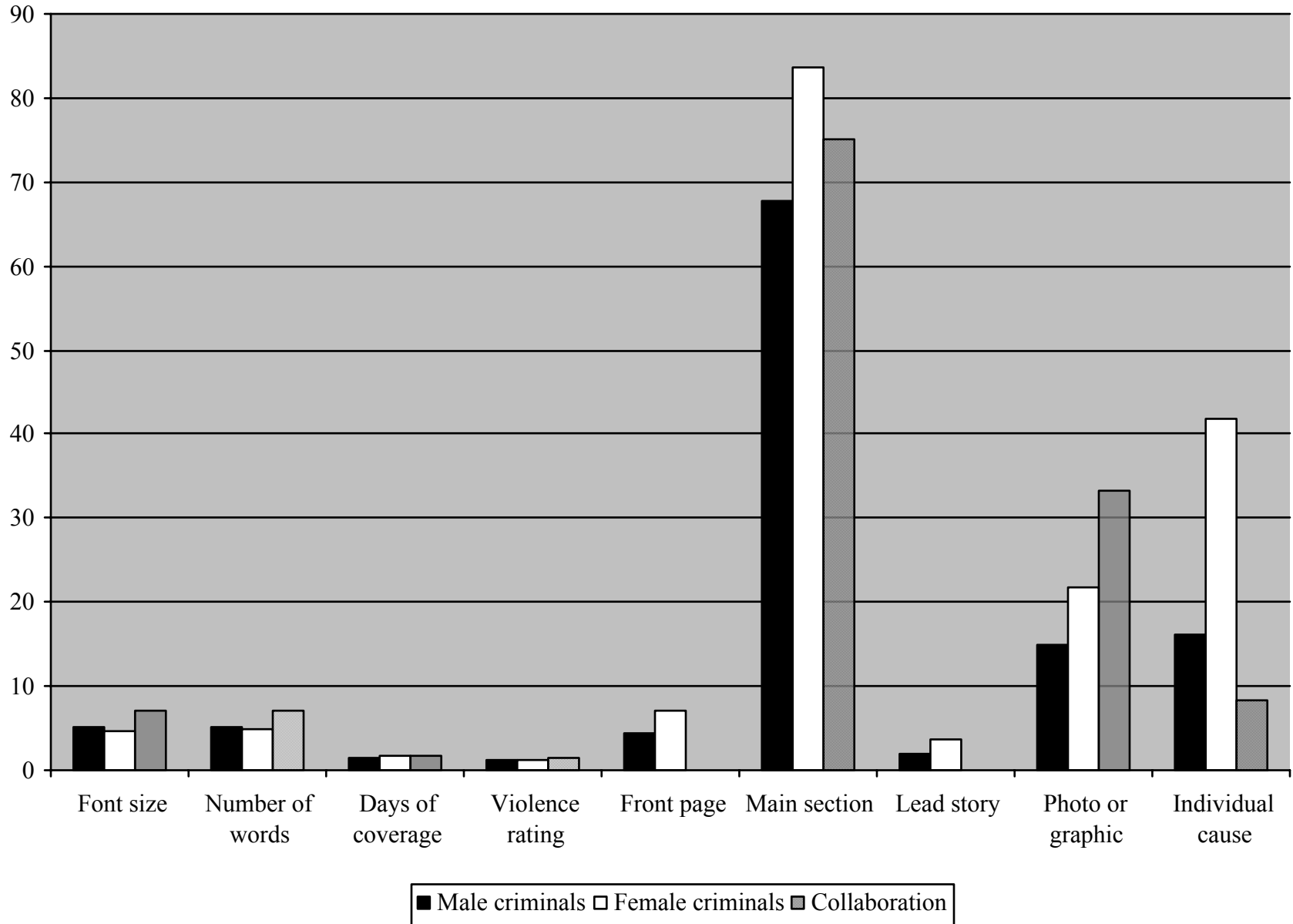


Figure 5: Gender differences in reported non-violent crime

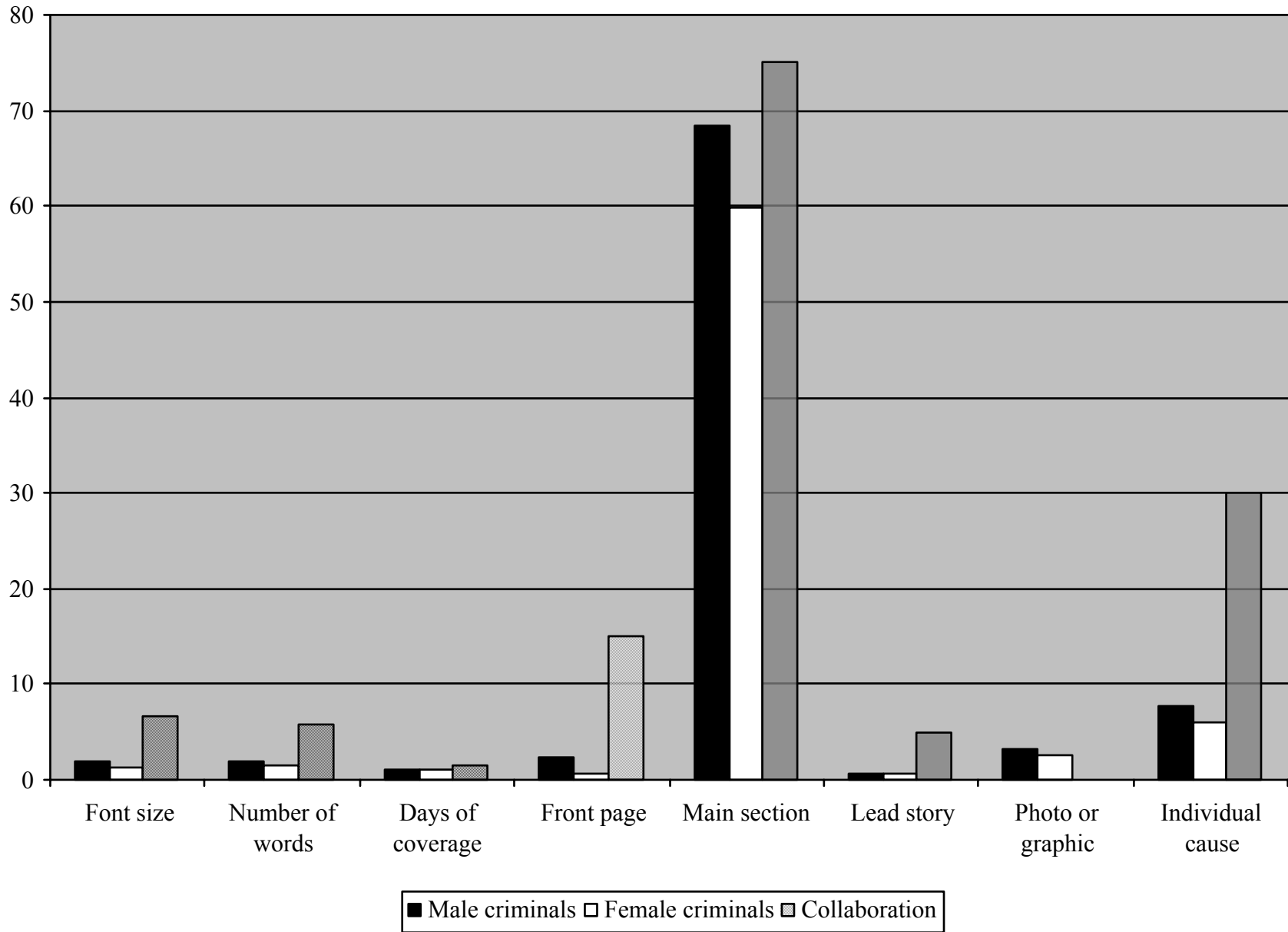


Figure 6: Gender differences in reported crimes committed against non-child victims

