



Applying Theory to Crime: **AGGRAVATED ASSAULT**

Assault, especially aggravated assault, is a serious crime in terms of FBI/Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) standards and is categorized as an Index crime. After all, an aggravated assault is typically considered an unsuccessful murder, in the sense that it usually involves an inherent intent to do serious harm, such as use of a weapon or infliction of major bodily injury. This leads us to the FBI/UCR definition of aggravated assault as being “the unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury on another.”

According to recent reports by the FBI, aggravated assaults range from approximately 725,000 to 760,000 each year. The National Crime Victimization Survey reported between 850,000 and over 1,000,000 in recent years, but that is consistent with differences in methodology and accounts for the “dark figure of crime,” as discussed in previous chapters. Reports of such assaults were highest in urban areas, which is not surprising since that is where homicide rates are highest. Some reviews have noted

that aggravated assault occurs most often during the summer months, when people (including offenders) are more likely to be out and about.

One significant difference between most aggravated assaults and homicides is that the largest proportion of the former includes blunt objects, such as baseball bats, sticks, and so forth, as opposed to firearms, which is probably why the victims of aggravated assault do not die in the attack. Like most other Index crimes, assault rates have dramatically decreased over the past two decades. Although most of the time there is a living victim, the clearance rate of aggravated assault is close to or less than 50% for most years. This is likely due to victims not wanting to contribute to the investigation, because usually their attacker is a family member, good friend, or other associate. Also, the attacker may be a gang member or person in the community from whom the victim fears retaliation. Regardless of the reasons, aggravated assault is not typically reported when it happens, and even when it is, the offender is typically not formally prosecuted.

Relating back to our case study at the beginning of this chapter, Faith was charged with aggravated assault because she used a weapon—a tree branch she picked up off the street—to hit a drug “customer.” Although it wasn’t premeditated, the use of this weapon seemed to exhibit an intent to inflict bodily harm, so it does fit the definition of aggravated assault. That is why Faith was charged with this crime. Still, intent is subjective, so if this case went to trial—which it did not—a jury would have to decide if such severe bodily harm was intended, if Faith was simply trying to retrieve her money or drugs, or if she was acting in self-defense.

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. Do the recent national data indicate that aggravated assaults have increased or decreased over the past 20 years?
2. Given the FBI definition of aggravated assaults, do you think a jury would have found Faith guilty of this crime?