

Girls in the juvenile justice system: Toward effective gender-responsive programming

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Despite overall declining numbers of juvenile criminal offenses, girls in the United States are increasingly being arrested and placed in secure detention facilities [1]. In 2005, the last year for which data are available, female offenders were involved in 34 percent of juvenile arrests in Wisconsin [2]. Forty-one percent of status offenses, and 32 percent of other offenses which resulted in juvenile arrests, were committed by females [2].

Research indicates that girls present unique challenges to the juvenile justice system, stemming in part from the fact that the system was originally organized to respond primarily to the needs of boys. Since the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act was reauthorized in 1992, states have been required to submit plans for the treatment of female delinquents to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. However, effective gender-responsive care remains elusive in Wisconsin and elsewhere.

As the issue of female delinquency has gained increased national attention, developments in research, theory, and programming have slowly followed. To address the needs of practitioners working within or in conjunction with the juvenile justice system, this *Research to Practice* brief focuses on two interrelated questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics of girls in the juvenile justice system, and how do they differ from those of their male counterparts?
- 2) What are some promising strategies for creating a more gender-responsive juvenile justice system?

Characteristics of females in the juvenile justice system

Males and females in the juvenile justice system are similar in some respects, but also tend to differ in a number of ways. In order to consider how best to reduce girls' future recidivism and assist them on a path toward responsible citizenship, a better understanding of this population is essential.

Boys and girls tend to differ in some of the circumstances of their delinquency. Some predictors of involvement with the juvenile justice system – such as antisocial behavior, peers, attitudes, and beliefs – are common to both genders. However, girls' delinquency is more likely to be preceded by physical and sexual abuse and troubled family and school relationships [3]. Other research indicates that the families of delinquent girls, in comparison to those of delinquent boys, are more likely to be severely dysfunctional [4, 5]. It has been estimated that over 75 percent of delinquent girls have a history of sexual abuse [4]; in comparison to boys, girls' abusive and traumatic events tend to occur earlier, and are more likely to be committed by a family member [6]. To illustrate, research in the State of Virginia indicates that the rate of physical abuse at home is twice as high in delinquent girls as it is in delinquent boys (28 percent vs. 14 percent), and the rate of sexual abuse at home is almost seven times higher (34 percent vs. 5 percent) [7].

In addition to suffering from higher rates of abuse, girls who are abused by family members are much more likely than boys to run away from home [6]. Of the 35 offense categories tracked statistically by the state of Wisconsin, in 2005, running away was the only offense for which the number of females arrested outnumbered males – 2,652 to 2,116 [2]. Offenses such as running away from home, breaking curfew, theft, and prostitution – which may sometimes be adaptive strategies for girls who

experience abuse at home [4] – constitute a substantial percentage of actions for which girls are arrested. In Wisconsin in 2005, 29 percent of all offenses which resulted in an arrest for girls involved breaking curfew, running away, robbery, burglary, or theft.

Gender differences also emerge when it comes to boys' and girls' choices of romantic and sexual partners and the implications of these relationships on delinquent behavior. Although being in a stable romantic relationship can be a positive turning point in males' lives, leading to decreases in criminal behavior, the opposite effect has been found in females. The reason for this discrepancy is at least partially related to whom youth are likely to choose as partners: Girls who exhibit behavior problems are more likely to be intimately involved with criminally deviant males [5]. This same pattern is not found among delinquent boys. Girls are thus likely to initiate delinquent behavior while intimately involved with a delinquent or criminal male, although the reverse is less often true [6].

Research indicates that girls entering the juvenile justice system are more likely than their male counterparts to suffer from mental health disorders [8]. For instance, one study in Cook County, Illinois, found that among those youth arrested and detained, almost two-thirds of boys and three-quarters of girls met criteria for a psychiatric illness [9]. There are likely several interrelated causes of the discrepancy in the rates of mental health disorders. For instance, a number of studies indicate that females are more likely than males to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following exposure to traumatic events [10]. Within the juvenile justice system, girls are more likely than boys to suffer from PTSD and other internalizing emotional disorders such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation [10].

When considering precursors to females' involvement in the juvenile justice system, one should also note the prevalence of substance use and abuse. Similar to males [11], most young female

offenders need treatment for substance abuse [1]. In some urban areas in the United States, over half of adolescent and young adult women are under the influence of drugs at the time of arrest [1], and arrests for drug use violations have increased substantially for adolescent girls in recent years [10]. In Wisconsin, 16 percent of girls' arrests stem from liquor law violations, intoxicated driving, or drug possession [2]. Beyond status offenses for consuming alcohol while under age, and criminal offenses related to using controlled substances or driving while intoxicated, substance abuse may precede other violations such as robbery and theft. Research indicates that such criminal acts by females tend to cease after drug use is stopped [6].

Males and females in secure detention and correctional facilities also vary in their physical health needs. A notable number of girls in such facilities are pregnant. For instance, in a large-scale study of the California juvenile justice system, 16 percent of girls reported that they were pregnant while incarcerated [12]. Additionally, many girls in the juvenile justice system face repeated occurrences of physical illness, sexually transmitted infections and other communicable diseases [12]. These illnesses likely reflect the lack of access to adequate health care that some experience while growing up in poverty, as well as their disproportionate exposure to stressful, traumatic experiences and, for some, prostitution.

In sum, girls entering the juvenile justice system tend to have multiple, and often unique, factors related to their delinquency such as dysfunctional families of origin; histories of physical and sexual abuse; unhealthy and destructive interpersonal relationships with family members and intimate partners; internalizing mental and emotional disorders; involvement with romantic partners who are criminally deviant; and substance abuse. Such factors should be taken into account when addressing the needs of females who enter the juvenile justice system.

Promising strategies for creating a gender-responsive juvenile justice system: What does research suggest?

Empirical research on the effectiveness of programs designed for girls in the juvenile justice system is sparse, and at this time, no evidence-based programs exist that have been created specifically for delinquent girls. Furthermore, evaluation research is mixed on whether traditionally male-oriented programs are equally effective for girls; some studies report no differences in effectiveness, while others show that these programs are less effective for girls [6] or sometimes harmful [5].

The dearth of knowledge on effective programming for girls is partially the result of research in juvenile justice and criminology historically focusing on males, at least for "serious" anti-social and disordered behavior, for which girls were not often arrested [5]. The focus on male delinquency probably stems from the fact that girls have been, and continue to be, far more likely than boys to be arrested for status offenses, which are generally considered less harmful to society. In addition, evaluations of delinquency intervention programs tend to focus on those behaviors more common in delinquent males, such as overtly aggressive acts, and not female-oriented outcomes, such as relational aggression and emotional disorders. Thus, one can't make a completely accurate assessment of how well programs work for girls simply because of what those studies tend to measure [5].

Although no evidence-based programs currently exist for gender-responsive treatment of female delinquency, the existing literature does provide some suggestions for best practices. Drawing on the best available evidence, below we provide some suggestions for making the juvenile justice system more responsive to females:

- ◆ **Take a comprehensive approach.** Because delinquent behavior is often determined by multiple factors, addressing just one factor, such as the youth's ability to form healthy interpersonal relationships, or a parent's discipline skills, is unlikely to have a substantial effect. In order for a comprehensive program to be effective at reducing recidivism, it will need to address the risk and protective factors and assets common to girls in the justice system [13]. In particular, it will be able to promote academic achievement and attachment to school; develop life skills; build positive interpersonal relationships, including those within the family and peer group and with intimate partners; and, as noted below, address mental and physical health concerns [6]. Literature focusing on the adult female incarcerated population suggests that effective comprehensive approaches tailored to the individual can be accomplished by case management services that help participants take advantage of a diversity of public and private services in the community [14].
- ◆ **Address physical and mental health needs.** Attending to girls' unique mental health and physical needs and providing services for pregnant, parenting, and sexually active teens is necessary to allow girls to focus on higher-order tasks such as education and healthy interpersonal relationships. Pregnant and parenting girls require gender-specific medical care such as contraceptive counseling and prenatal care, and other services offering parenting education, specialized nutrition and clothing, and counseling if they are separated from their children.
- ◆ **Focus on strengths.** Strengths-based models may be more effective than deficit-based or punitive approaches, particularly for helping delinquent girls become healthy, productive members of society [15]. A core assumption of the strengths-based model is that individuals are more likely to change when they are full partners in identifying goals and their own strengths which may be used toward achieving those goals, rather than simply being passive recipients of change efforts initiated by others [15]. Strengths-based programs that contain a restorative justice component may be particularly effective with female delinquents [16], allowing amends to be made within the context of relationships and interpersonal connections. Restorative justice may help female offenders develop positive identities and an awareness of their ability to alleviate the victim's pain and restore well-being, and promote a sense of community belonging rather than social isolation [16, 17]. This research on the juvenile population mirrors that found with adult female offenders: the most successful community-based programs for women use empowerment to allow them to make positive changes in their lives and gain independence from unhealthy relationships [18].
- ◆ **Reach out to families.** Although targeting the family is important for all juvenile offenders, the families of delinquent girls have a much greater likelihood of being severely dysfunctional, and because abuse at home is more common, programs should be prepared to address it [6]. In addition, family members should be referred to services for treatment of psychiatric illness, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Programs should also recognize that families with multiple risk factors can be a barrier to effective treatment. These families are less likely to stay in treatment and to benefit from it [5]. Therefore, intensive and persistent outreach to families may be particularly important for effectively working with delinquent girls.

- ◆ **Hire and train staff who are responsive to the interpersonal nature of girls' development and serve as "believable" role models.** Mental health and juvenile justice professionals report that working with delinquent girls, rather than boys, is harder because these girls tend to have more difficulty forming trusting relationships with others, and are more likely to be verbally abusive and relationally aggressive [5, 19]. Thus, staff's abilities to relate to girls are critical to program effectiveness [13]. Recognizing histories of victimization and unhealthy relationships, effective programs promote the establishment of positive relationships and appropriate social boundaries. Male staff, in particular, may need additional training and assistance in boundary setting with female delinquents who may not have experienced a healthy relationship with an adult male [19]. Additionally,

For further information

In 1998, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) released a report titled "Guiding principles for promising female programming: An inventory of best practices." Although this report is several years old, the recommendations remain relevant and are consistent with what is currently being suggested by researchers and other professionals. The report can be found at <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/pubs/-principles/contents.html>.

The most cutting edge knowledge on effective programs and practices for delinquent girls will likely become available in the near future from the Girls Study Group at RTI International. Supported by OJJDP, this interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners is in the process of developing the research foundation needed for informed decisions about how to prevent and reduce female delinquency and violence. Those interested in the latest developments in this area would do well to stay abreast of the Study Group's progress by regularly checking their website: <http://girlsstudygroup.rti.org>.

diversity among staff, in terms of their racial and ethnic backgrounds and life experiences, is particularly important for responding to diversity among female delinquents [14].

- ◆ **Maintain an environment of physical, psychological, and emotional safety.** In order for positive changes to occur, the environment in which relationships develop needs to be safe and supportive. Research on adult female offenders suggests that program participants need to feel safe in the program setting, feel open to learning from staff and other participants, and feel comfortable taking risks with attempts to change their behaviors [14]. Additionally, because girls are more likely than boys to be experiencing PTSD while incarcerated, traditional ways of maintaining order and the use of restraints and isolation in juvenile facilities may backfire with girls [20], who can essentially be "revictimized" by such practices.
- ◆ **Rethink group-based treatment.** The use of group-based treatment for both male and female juvenile offenders has been questioned in the literature because offenders may reinforce or increase each other's criminal attitudes and behaviors [21]. Although group-based treatments are not always detrimental for juvenile offenders [5], they may be in some situations or for some individuals. If group-based treatments are used, they should never be mixed-gender, because female participants may not feel comfortable discussing personal issues like past abuse [14]. Girls-only programming allows young women the "time, environment, and permission" [22] to prioritize addressing their own needs and not those of males [14].

In sum, adolescent girls are entering the juvenile justice system at higher rates than in the past, requiring that professionals responsible for administering programs respond to their specific needs. Research is only beginning to understand the precursors to girls' delinquency and the best ways to intervene when attempting to prevent further delinquent acts, promote more pro-social be-

liefs, attitudes, and behaviors, and address physical and mental health needs. However, a sufficient amount of literature currently exists to begin suggesting best practices for working with delinquent girls and planning future gender-responsive programming. It is expected that continued research will significantly advance practice in years to come.

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This series expands upon ideas that are discussed in *What Works, Wisconsin: What Science Tells Us about Cost-Effective Programs for Juvenile Delinquency Prevention*, which is also available for download at the address given above.

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