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## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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# DELINQUENCY AND VIOLENCE AMONG GIRLS

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Community leaders, policymakers, educators, funding agencies, and the public have begun to recognize that youth delinquency and violence is a complex public health problem in this country (Dahlberg, 1998; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999; Thornton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2000). Embedded within the public health concerns surrounding youth delinquency and violence, the last decade has witnessed the increasing involvement of girls in more serious and violent crimes. Consequently, girls have been more visible in the juvenile justice system and have been entering the system at younger ages. Catholic educational leaders exercise an important ministry in this area, espousing a holistic philosophy in a faith-based setting to support at-risk youth. As communities, schools, practitioners, and families continue to grapple with female juvenile delinquency, this review sheds light on several critical aspects of the issue by providing a statistical overview based on national data, characteristics of female offenders, risk factors for girls' delinquency, and promising approaches for intervention.

## STATISTICAL OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

A recent Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) publication offered a concise summary of girls' delinquency: "Female involvement in the juvenile justice system, once seen as an anomaly, has evolved into a significant trend" (Budnick & Shields-Fletcher, 1998, p. 1; see also Scahill, 2000). Females represented 25% of United States juvenile

arrests in 1996 (Snyder, 1997). That figure increased 4% since 1983, and, indicative of a much larger trend, had been rising steadily since 1960 when females represented 11% of all arrests (Steffensmeier, 1993).

The female rate of increase is larger than that reported for young men. Poe-Yamagata and Butts (1996) reported a 23% increase in female juvenile arrests versus an 11% increase in male juvenile arrests between 1989 and 1993. A continuation of that trend is evident in Federal Bureau of Investigation crime statistics indicating that female arrests increased more (or decreased less) than male arrests in most offense categories between 1994 and 1998 (Snyder, 1999). The number of female juveniles arrested for violent crimes such as murder, robbery, and aggravated assault increased 25% with no increase in arrests of male juveniles for the same offenses (Budnick & Shields-Fletcher, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999). Data on delinquency cases also indicate females' increased involvement in the juvenile justice system. Stahl (2000) documented an 83% increase in cases involving females for the years 1988 through 1997, noting that "growth in cases involving females outpaced the growth for males in all offense categories" (p. 1).

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF FEMALE JUVENILE OFFENDERS**

Overviews of the research literature (Acoca, 1999; Community Research Associates, 1998; Greene, Peters, & Associates, and Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1998) converge on the following characteristics in describing the juvenile female population at high risk for offending:

- 14 to 16 years old,
- likely to be poor and living in a high crime neighborhood,
- likely to have been sexually, physically, or emotionally abused,
- likely to have a history of poor academic performance,
- likely to have abused drugs or alcohol, and
- likely to have gone without attention for medical and mental health needs.

Beyond these general observations, two other trends are elaborated further: the decreasing age at first offense for female juvenile offenders and the increased proportion of female offenders of color.

Across the nation, females are becoming involved with the justice system at a younger age. According to a report prepared for OJJDP, one in five girls in secure confinement is now age 14 or younger (Greene, Peters, & Associates, 1998). Scahill (2000) reported that 62% of females charged with delinquent acts in 1997 were under age 16. The National Center for Juvenile Justice (1987-91) indicated a 10% increase in the number of 13- and 14-year-olds involved in juvenile court (Bergsmann, 1994). Furthermore, from 1988

through 1997, an 89% increase was documented in the number of female delinquency cases under age 16 (Snyder, Finnegan, Stahl, & Poole, 1999).

The juvenile female offender population is also characterized by a disproportionate representation of ethnic minorities (Bergsmann, 1989; Campbell, 1995; Community Research Associates, 1998; Greene, Peters, & Associates, 1998). Bergsmann (1994), reviewing data obtained by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency from 29 states, found that of all young women in secure detention 13% were Hispanic and almost 50% were African American. For the years spanning 1988 through 1997, cases involving females increased across all racial groups, with a 74% increase for Whites, a 106% increase for African American females, and a 102% increase for other races (Scahill, 2000; Snyder et al., 1999).

## **CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS FOR GIRLS' DELINQUENCY AND VIOLENCE**

Greene, Peters, & Associates (1998), along with numerous others, have consistently made a clear point: more often than not, *female juvenile delinquents were victims themselves before they became offenders* (Davis, Schoen, Greenberg, Desroches, & Abrams, 1997; Girls, Incorporated, 1996; Prescott, 1997). Scholars and practitioners have consistently "identified victimization—physical, sexual, and emotional—as the first step along females' pathways into the juvenile and criminal justice systems and as a primary determinant of the types and patterns of offenses typically committed by girls and women" (Acoca, 1999, p. 5; see also Acoca & Austin, 1996). Calhoun, Jurgens, and Chen (1993) found a history of sexual abuse among 70% of female delinquents. Based on data from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency study of girls in the California juvenile justice system, Acoca and Dedel (1998) reported that 92% had been subjected to emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Moreover, 75% of these young women reported regular use of drugs and alcohol, typically beginning around age 14.

Generally, school-level factors have been associated with youth violence and delinquency. Poor academic performance is a significant contributor to early onset of delinquency (Dryfoos, 1990; Yoshikawa, 1994). Furthermore, academic failure (Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000; Maguin & Loeber, 1996), truancy (Farrington, 1989), and low commitment to school (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996) have each been implicated as contributors to violent behavior. Acoca (1999) confirmed that "failing in school was almost as universal an experience as victimization" (p. 6) in the violence trajectories of the females in her study. Further, her survey results indicated that 91% of the female juvenile offenders had experienced either suspension, expulsion, repeating a grade, or being placed in a special classroom (Acoca, 1999).

Health and mental health issues are also critical risk factors for female

juvenile offending. Data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods has highlighted the role of depression in delinquency. For example, compared to their non-depressed counterparts, mildly to moderately depressed girls were more likely to commit property crimes and crimes against other people, even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Obeidallah & Earls, 1999). Serious physical health problems (88%) and a need for psychological services (53%) were reported by a majority of girls in the California juvenile justice system (Acoca, 1999).

Although it is not within the scope of this review to present an in-depth review of all other factors that place girls at greater risk of juvenile delinquency and crime, some areas that were not mentioned have been explored in the research literature. For example, gang membership contributes to increased risk of both victimization and violence (Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999; Morris et al., 1995). Also, substance abuse is an identified risk factor, as many juvenile females reported being intoxicated or under the influence of illegal substances while engaging in criminal acts (Sommers & Baskin, 1994).

## **PROGRAMMING AND INTERVENTIONS FOR GIRLS**

As stated by Greene, Peters, & Associates (1998),

the 1992 reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 required states to apply for federal formula grant dollars to examine their juvenile justice systems and identify gaps in their ability to provide services to female juvenile offenders. (chap. 2)

The reauthorization further called for an analysis of gender-specific services and an attention to female service needs. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in recognition of the needs of female juvenile offenders, has subsequently engaged in a multilevel approach to impact states' efforts in dealing with female offenders (Budnick & Shields-Fletcher, 1998). For example, an OJJDP publication, *Juvenile Female Offenders: A Status of the States Report* (Community Research Associates, 1998), examined the efforts of 24 states. The report provided a historical overview of juvenile female offending and served as a mechanism for disseminating practices and programs across state boundaries.

In cooperation with OJJDP, Greene, Peters, & Associates (1998) produced a training document entitled *Guiding Principles for Promising Female Programming: An Inventory of Best Practices*. This report highlighted effective, female-specific programs and practices across the nation and outlined processes for program and policy development (see also Girls Incorporated,

1996). According to their review, programs serving female juvenile delinquents must be:

- comprehensive (dealing with behavior in context; understanding influence of risk factors; and including primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention),
- gender-specific (featuring a focus on relationship-building skills, decision making, and “femaleness” as a positive identity), and
- able to address resiliency as well as risk factors.

Reviewing effective programs for young, at-risk females, Chesney-Lind and Sheldon (1998) noted three common elements: a comprehensive counseling component, educational and occupational support, and a capacity to address the needs of young women not able to remain with their families. Despite these promising advances in the knowledge base, much more information is needed on the intersection of female-specific risk and protective factors with effective intervention/prevention program components.

## **WHY ADDRESS FEMALE JUVENILE DELINQUENCY NOW?**

In statistical terms, as reviewed earlier, the problem of female juvenile delinquency has escalated into a public health issue meriting our deepest attention and concern. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of both sound gender-specific theory and effective gender-specific programs to address youth violence nationwide (Acoca, 1999). Progress has been made in the last decade, however, in mapping girls' developmental patterns and identifying some gender-specific risk factors for young females' increasing involvement in delinquency and crime.

Despite the reauthorization of the 1992 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, which underscored the need for eliminating gender bias in placement and treatment and for providing access to the full range of available services for female offenders, it is clear that “the needs of females in the juvenile justice system have not kept pace with societal changes in the roles and goals of women” (Greene, Peters, & Associates, 1998, chap. 1). The findings reviewed here regarding gender-specific risk factors and the commonalities of successful girl-serving programs provide a starting point for helping girls to lead safer and healthier lives.

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