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Discussing Violence: Let's hear it for the Girls

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Summary

This article presents some key findings from an exploratory study of teenage girls' views and experiences of violence, carried out in Scotland. Using data gathered from self-report questionnaires, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, it conveys girls' perceptions of violence and discusses the nature and extent of the many forms of violence in girls' lives. In particular, the article flags up the pervasiveness of verbal conflicts within girls' lives and outlines the characteristics of those girls who describe themselves as violent. It concludes with a brief discussion of practice and policy implications.

Background

Reducing youth crime is a major part of the current Government's strategy to tackle social exclusion. Primary concern has focused on the offending behaviour of young men rather than young women because of the relatively small proportion of female offenders. However, there has been a growing public view, fuelled by the media, that girls are becoming more 'criminally minded' and, in particular, more violent. In recent years, stories about the growing problem of female violence – particularly girl gangs roaming the streets and randomly attacking innocent victims – have been a recurring feature of the pages of our newspapers (see, for example, Carroll, 1998; Kibby, 1999; Mitchell, 2000; Stephen, 1999; Thompson, 2001) and magazines (see, for example,

Bradley, 2001; Eason, 2000; Kirsta, 2000). Some accounts suggest that physical violence amongst girls is becoming normalised and others predict that, over the next few years, girls will 'overtake boys in the violence stakes'. In all such reports, 'girl thugs' are portrayed in highly gendered ways, where their sexuality and lack of femininity are emphasised (Batchelor, 2001a, 2001b).

In a society where concerns about crime are firmly embedded within a youth discourse (Muncie, 1999), girls depicted as loud, loutish, often drunk and disorderly, out of control and looking for fights, are increasingly presented as a new source of the 'youth problem' (Thompson, 1998). However, whilst the rhetoric surrounding violent and anti-social behaviour by girls echoes concerns about troublesome boys, it also carries an added dimension of gravity precisely *because* they are girls.

Yet these depictions of the 'new' violent female offender are inaccurate on a number of counts. Whilst the media are prone to exaggerate increases in criminality, especially that among youth, there is some evidence to support claims that girls are increasingly being drawn into the criminal justice system. That said, females are more likely to be apprehended for crimes of dishonesty (fraud, shoplifting) and indecency (mainly prostitution) than crimes of violence. Compared to young men, the number of young women who commit violent offences remains low. In 1999, females (of all age groups) accounted for eight per cent of non-sexual crimes of violence in Scotland. In terms of actual numbers, 348 women had a charge proven against them and of this group just over a quarter (92 or 26%) were under the age of 21 years (Scottish Executive, 2000). This compares to 3,817 men who had a charge of non-sexual

violence proven against them, of which 39% (1,489) were aged under 21 (Scottish Executive, 2000).

The rarity of female violence has meant that most violence prevention programmes, most empirical research and most theoretical explanations of violence have focused on young men. In Britain, there has been very little examination of how girls might use or encounter violence in their everyday lives, although there are some signs that academic interest is growing (Archer, 1998; Hardy and Howitt, 1998; Kendall, 1999). This contrasts with the situation in North America, where several studies have been conducted. Whilst this (North American) research provides a useful theoretical background for developing an understanding of criminally violent young women, it is limited in its application to Britain as it takes place in a different cultural setting, focusing on girls from specific socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds who are members of Black or Hispanic gangs (e.g. Baskin and Sommers, 1993, 1998; Campbell, 1984, 1990; Chesney-Lind, 1997).

Introducing the ‘View from the Girls’ study

In order to begin to address this gap, we embarked on a large-scale study of teenage girls in Scotland, in order to see where violence fitted into their lives. Engaging with Stanko’s work on ‘everyday violence’ (1990), we adopted an approach that was sensitive to girls’ mundane, day-to-day experiences and the social, material and gendered circumstances of their lives. The project was *not* designed as a study of ‘violent’ girls, or girls struggling at the socio-economic margins, but instead was concerned with the everyday understandings, conceptualisations and experiences of ‘ordinary’ girls drawn from a cross-section of backgrounds across Scotland. In this

sense, the study marks a departure from mainstream criminological research on violence, where the preoccupation has been with public, rather than private, *criminal* violence (Stanko, 1994) and much of women's experience of violence has been rendered invisible (Kelly, 1988).

We began the research with several main questions that we wanted girls to answer for us. In brief, these related to the meanings that violence holds for girls; the forms of violence that girls are involved in; the contexts in which such violence takes place; what girls' perceive to be the functions and purposes of violence; and the role and the impact of violence on their everyday lives. In order to address these questions, we employed a range of methods including self-report questionnaires, small group discussions and in-depth life-history interviews. Over the course of two years, approximately 800 girls between the ages of 13 and 16 participated in one or more aspects of the study (671 completed the survey, 89 contributed to focus group discussions and 12 took part in individual interviews). Whilst not representative, the sample included a cross-section of girls drawn from inner city, town and rural areas and included girls from ethnic minority backgrounds, girls who had a disability, girls living in isolated locations, and those accommodated by the local authority. The aim was to tap into as wide a range of experiences as possible.

The remainder of this paper focuses on some of the key results relating to girls and violence. These are arranged in three parts: girls' conceptualisations of 'violence', the pervasiveness of verbal abuse in their lives, and girls' experience of physical violence. Both the quantitative (questionnaire) and the qualitative (focus group and individual

interview) data sources are drawn on, although percentages refer to the survey data only.

The Meaning of Violence: A Question of Definition(s)

To help us get to grips with the ways in which girls conceptualise violence, respondents were asked about what, in their view, 'counted' as 'violence'. Girls in the qualitative sample generally responded by talking about a physical act such as hitting, kicking, punching, slapping, or fighting. However, when recounting their *own* experiences of violence, they included a much broader range of physical acts (such as sexual assault, self-harm, being locked in a cupboard and/or pushed in a river) *and* verbal confrontations (offensive name-calling, bullying and intimidation, threats, racial harassment), as well as incidents of vandalism and cruelty towards animals. This *range* of activities gives some clue as to the many forms that violence takes in girls' lives but also, crucially, raises the question of what is it we (researchers, practitioners, young people) are referring to when we talk about violence. A range of different discourses are brought to bear on the issue of violence (Stanko, 2000). Whilst there is clearly some common ground in terms of the normative (legal, adult) conception of violence as an intentionally harmful interpersonal physical act, there are arguably other conceptualisations that are perhaps more pertinent in terms of young peoples' own lived experience.

A strong message conveyed to us by the girls in our study was that a primary focus on *physical* violence masks other forms, in particular verbal abuse, that are often intended and/or experienced as potentially more hurtful and damaging. Verbal conflicts are a pervasive feature of girls' social worlds, occurring on an everyday basis, and for many

they are a major source of anxiety. According to the self-report data, 91% of girls had been verbally intimidated by offensive name-calling, threats, taunts or ridicule. Being the target for malicious gossip emerged as the greatest overall fear for girls (61% of girls reported being worried about someone gossiping about them) and half of the survey sample (50%) said that they were worried about being verbally bullied or threatened. Frequently, verbal conflicts emanate from within the context of a previous friendship where, girls report, the verbal abuse is often more vitriolic, and its impact is more keenly felt.

While girls' talk about violence is usually bound up with talk about interpersonal relationships, girls rarely raised domestic violence as an issue in our discussions. Some, particularly younger girls, expressed confusion about the ambit of the term, and whether or not it constituted acceptable, normal or indeed "natural" behaviour. This finding supports earlier research which found that young people – boys as well as girls – are fairly ambivalent about what sort of behaviour 'counts' as domestic abuse (Mullender *et al*, 1999). It also highlights the importance of social context for understanding violence (Edgar and Martin, 2000; Messerschmidt, 1997; Richardson and May, 1999; Stanko, 2000). Girls' conceptualisations of violence, and the concrete forms they spoke about most readily, cohered around *public* violent events that took place *outside* the home. In the self-report study, 59% of the physical acts of violence girls reported perpetrating were directed at brothers or sisters. Yet sibling fights, no matter how physically damaging, were not seen as violence.

Similarly, girls were reluctant to describe coercive sexual encounters with *boys they knew* as 'violence'. In this context, the term seemed inappropriate for many girls. Again

this related to uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of the behaviour, particularly when it did not conform to the stereotypical image of ‘stranger danger’, as in the excerpt below.

We were in my mates and we went up to this boy’s hoose. He was drunk ... When a’body went through to the kitchen I was sitting mysel’ and he was sitting, ken, across fae me, and he came over to the couch and he started pulling doon his trousers and trying to push me doon. I got right feard [scared]. John was there, Richard was there, and Maxine was there. And they, they didnae ken what tae dae and it was actually Maxine that came through and she was the only one that kind o’ slapped him. And I really got afeard. He was shouting “If you dinna let me shag you I’m going to tell my ma”. Ken what I mean? We were sitting in his hoose trying to be quiet ‘cos his ma was in her bed. I was shitting myself. I was roaring and greeting for the rest o’ the night. And a’body kept goin’ on aboot it for days and I felt really horrible. ‘Cos I felt as though I must be a slut if that is what he is trying to dae tae me. If he thinks that he could just dae that and that I would be all right wi’ it. That did, that really made me feel really dirty and low.

[Interview 4]

As a researcher interpreting this extract, one can ‘find’ an account of attempted rape, yet the young woman herself was unwilling to describe the incident as such. She felt that this was what boys were “naturally” like and, because of her friendship with the young man concerned, that she herself was somehow responsible for what had happened. The conventions of patriarchy, we would argue, play a key role in permitting and encouraging such a view. Hence the passage offers another example of the lack of coherence between what we, as adult, feminist researchers/practitioners, may term

‘violence’ and what girls themselves understand by the term (see Burman, Batchelor and Brown, 2001, for further discussion).

Girls’ feelings about sexual pressure by boys that they knew contrasted markedly with their attitudes towards sexual violence more generally. The possibility of being sexually assaulted *by a stranger* was a major source of anxiety for many girls and, in the self-report study, 58% of girls reported being worried about being attacked in this way, half of whom said they were ‘very worried’. Again, this suggests an association of violence with the public, rather than the private sphere, reflecting particular (patriarchal) discourses about sites and forms of violence.

Clearly girls’ conceptualisations of what counts as violence are diverse and wide-ranging and do not always correspond to ‘common-sense’ definitions or understandings. Their opinions raise the question of whether different behaviours can or should all be defined as ‘violence’. Given our undertaking to use girls’ own words and ground the study in their experiences, we would argue that their concerns should be taken seriously. All too often girls are socially and publicly silenced and their views and opinions marginalised.

Verbal Abuse and the Power of Talk

The most common ‘violent’ encounter reported by girls of all ages and from all backgrounds and situations concerned their use and experience of (what we have called) ‘verbal abuse’. Examples include threats (e.g. “You’re a lying cow and if you don’t stop it I’m gonna hit you”), name-calling and insults (e.g. calling someone a “lezzie”, a “ned” or a “fat cow”), ridicule, and intimidation by shouting or swearing.

Girls reported being singled out for their so-called undesirable physical attributes (such as being overweight or having red hair), their dress style (especially “cheap”, non-branded clothes) or suspect personal hygiene. Skin colour and regional accents were also identified as signifiers of difference and therefore ridicule, as were sexual reputation and sexual orientation. Insults were not solely directed at girls themselves, however. Like Campbell (1986) and Anderson (1997) we found that family members, particularly mothers, were also targets for derogatory and critical remarks.

Trading insults was an everyday occurrence. It was often also a two-way activity. Almost three-quarters of girls (72%) in the quantitative sample reported having ever used verbal abuse towards others and 91% reported being on the receiving end of verbal abuse (mostly from other girls). Although the traditional dichotomy between victim and perpetrator is fairly entrenched in our understanding of violent encounters, we found that individual girls could rarely be neatly fitted into the categories of ‘victim’ or ‘perpetrator’. We found that this was a dynamic process where girls assumed different roles at different times, and sometimes within the same conflict situation. When girls in the qualitative sample talked about verbally abusive behaviour, it was rarely described as a discreet, single or one-off event. Rather it was regarded as a routine, ongoing and cumulative *process* embedded in girls’ everyday experience.

Gossip, slagging, name-calling and spreading rumours were among the main causes of conflict between girls and were often precursors to physical violence. Significantly, girls attributed a superior and in-depth knowledge of the intricacies of “slagging” to other girls. Being “slagged” was considered most hurtful where someone used inside

knowledge to deliberately humiliate or show off in front of others. Contrary to its literal meaning, “talking behind someone’s back” could be construed as an overt and challenging expression of aggression, generating intense anger, annoyance, and the need to act in “self-defence”:

Jordan: *See when it's the lassies that do it you have just got to turn round and punch 'em, 'cos they really do your nut in.*

Kelly: *Aye you have. 'Cos they just mouth and mouth on and on and on.*

Jordan: *It does your nut in. Some of em have got squeaky voices and it gies you a sore heid.*

Kelly: *Aye, you've just gotta whack 'em one.*

Marie: *Oh man it's pure annoying.*

[Group 2]

When the effects of “gossip” and “bad-mouthing” were considered within the context of girls’ friendships, insights emerged as to why they were considered to be a powerful catalyst for physical violence. The premise of “close” friendships between teenage girls is sharing, trust, loyalty and the keeping of secrets (Griffiths, 1995; Hey, 1997). Girls in the study commonly described their friendships with other girls as “the most important thing” in their lives, and spending time and hanging out with friends was their main social activity. This means that girls can react powerfully to fall-outs with friends and breaches of confidence.

According to girls themselves, being on the receiving end of verbal abuse has serious consequences. In particular, it has clear associations with feelings of self-esteem, and

self-confidence. In the self-report sample, girls indicated that they were most likely to feel like crying or hurting themselves after experiencing verbal abuse. Accordingly, girls who had been verbally abused were also more likely to report self-harming: 59% of respondents who said they had been shouted at, sworn at or called names had also self-harmed. The more often a girl reported having been verbally abused, the more likely she was to report deliberately hurting herself in one or more of the following ways: stopping eating; over-eating; making herself sick; and/or physically hurting or cutting herself.

Physical Violence and the ‘Violent Girls’

Before attempting to delineate those girls identified/self-identifying as ‘violent’ in our sample, this last section considers the experiences of girls in general vis-à-vis physical violence. In the main, girls’ commonplace experiences of physical violence were as observers. Witnessing violence was a key theme spontaneously raised in group discussions and interviews and the vast majority of girls reported having witnessed at first-hand some form of interpersonal physical violence, usually a fight within their own locality. A massive 98.5% of girls reported having witnessed such violence on at least one occasion and 70% of girls had witnessed more than five such incidents. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65%) knew someone personally – usually another young person – who had been physically hurt or injured by physical violence. A substantial proportion of girls appeared to view these experiences as “normal”, “routine”, “everyday”, and “unremarkable”.

Personal experience of physical violence, however, was far less common. In the quantitative sample 30% of girls admitted to *ever* having hurt someone by deliberately

hitting, punching or kicking them, compared to 41% of girls reporting violent victimisation. Only a very small proportion of girls in the study (10%) reported being routinely physically violent (i.e. they reported having committed seven or more different *types* of violent acts, e.g. deliberately pushing, shaking, kicking, burning, spitting at, cutting, or hitting someone with a fist or some other object, pulling hair or trapping fingers in a door) or self-identified as violent (10%). The group of girls that had committed seven or more of the acts listed *and* described themselves as violent (referred to below as ‘violent girls’) made up five per cent of the total sample (n=30). Violent girls were generally older (15 or 16 years) and were drawn from a range of backgrounds and locations (both rural and urban); they were not all products of deprived, inner-city environments. None reported being gang members.

This group of girls reported witnessing a wide range of physically violent acts and demonstrated a high tolerance of violence in its various forms. They reported higher levels of self-harming than other girls did, higher levels of verbal abuse, and significantly higher levels of physically violent victimisation. Also, they reported being more spatially mobile than other girls and had a higher ‘on-street presence’. They were more likely to spend time hanging about outside alone or with their friends, and were more likely to stay out without their parents’ knowledge. They were also more likely to have had police contact and reported higher levels of ‘delinquent’ behaviour, alcohol consumption and illicit drug use.

Moving beyond the statistics, discussions with self-proclaimed violent girls in the qualitative sample supported these findings. This group often spoke of fighting as an integral part of their sense of self (“I’m a bully ... A bitch”) and of having a pride in

their “hard” reputation and the rewards it could bring. They described routine involvement in fights with other young people (girls and boys) and antagonistic encounters with a range of adults (notably parents, teachers, local shopkeepers and the police). The most common justification for hitting someone was self defence or “if they hit you first”. Other reasons included “insulting your family” (particularly your mother), “stealing your boyfriend”, “betraying trust”, “not treating you with respect”, “gossiping”, “slagging you off behind your back” or “spreading stories” about sexual history or reputation.

Most of these girls spoke of occupying a social world where the use of violence and intimidation were acceptable ways to deal with conflict (“What other ways are you meant tae stick up for yourself if they start on you?”). Crucially, a core belief was that the world was full of “enemies” “out to get you” and “put one over on you”. Violent girls described a constant state of being “ready for action” and self-defence, and public displays of weakness (backing down, crying) were regarded as unacceptable. The following quotes from Marianne, a 17-year-old young mother, and Jo, a 14-year-old girl from an inner-city scheme, are typical.

Like my Da says, “Never show fear for naebody, Mari. If it happens it happens but you never ever let naebody walk over you, never show fear o’ naebody”. It’s just ever since then watching my Da [being attacked by a group of men with baseball bats] and my Da saying that tae me afterwards I’ve never shown fear of naebody... ‘Cos if you show fear of somebody they’re just gonna walk all over the top of you. If you show fear of them, they always come back tae you. They always pick on you mair and mair and mair.

[Interview 3]

You can stick up for yourself 'cos o' certain things that has happened in your family, like if you are no treated right or if you are ignored or if you get battered fae your ma or your da. Just things like that, ken. You're hard that way 'cause of your family.

[Interview 4, original emphasis]

The need to “stick up for yourself” to ensure respect was of key significance to this group of girls. Great importance was also ascribed to “standing up for” and “sticking together” with friends and family; many described deep-rooted attachments to their local area and valued group solidarity highly. Violent girls often understood their social worlds in terms of “territories” and “boundaries” and other young people were generally categorised in terms of their neighbourhood affinities.

Maxine: *It's almost like territorialism. The bridge, where the railway station is, is a fighting point.*

Alyson: *That's what all the fighting is about, the bridge.*

Lesley: *I would say that it is really our bridge.*

Angela: *It is ours! It comes from Southend train station. It's ours.*

Maxine: *That's how it started off.*

Angela: *My Dad used to fight for Northwood. It has just always gone on.*

[Group 17]

Discussion and Conclusions

The present data suggest that there is little evidence that girls are using physical violence to any great extent, either towards each other or anyone else – apart from their siblings. While not to deny that there are girls who do attack others, from our research we would say that the story is not of a huge rise in physical violence by girls, nor of girl gangs, or of girls becoming more anti-social. That said, the study does reveal a fairly high level of routinised verbal abuse, which is not as readily visible as physical violence, and fear of sexual assault.

Researching the ways in which girls understand, experience and use violence raises a number of implications for social work and probation practitioners. Attention to girls' conceptualisations of violence, for example, raises important questions about whether adult-led agendas on violence and bullying take sufficient account of girls' own views and experiences. While practitioners must inevitably respond to policy agendas, which are in turn related to public attitudes and anxieties, they must also hear and heed the potentially different agendas of the girls with whom they work.

The importance of involving participants in the development of meaningful programme initiatives has been highlighted by Dixon (2000). She criticises the rigidity of the *What Works* ideology, arguing that a preoccupation with 'programme integrity' stifles spontaneity and creativity. This is seen to impact both on programme effectiveness and programme development:

“The point is that for change to occur offenders need to experience the value of change efforts for themselves. This is unlikely to emerge when offenders go through the motions prescribed to them by others. The exchanges in the group

have to strike a personal chord with each offender. Each has to feel that at various points something uniquely relevant to her or him has happened, and that the exchange makes sense to the person in terms of personal life experiences.” (Dixon, 2000, p.18)

This points to a need to develop resources that utilise the experiences of girls themselves and of girls who have learned to deal with anger and violence.

The key lies in ensuring that any initiative developed to tackle the problems caused by ‘troublesome girls’ is flexible enough to address the experiences and concerns of those same girls. In our study, we found that “falling-out” has momentous consequences for girls and is seen as a major source of anguish, not to mention a precursor to physical violence. Yet such incidents were often not taken seriously by adults. This may stem from the fact that disputes among girls tend to be protracted and often involve exclusionary tactics, verbal abuse and “dirty looks” which are difficult to pinpoint and prove. Nevertheless, the impact of “fall-outs”, their relationships to personal and social identity, self-esteem and self-harm and their key significance to ‘violent girls’ as a form of provocation, suggest that they are crucial for those working with girls to understand, explore, and address. Violence does not arise from the random action of strangers, but from within girls’ interpersonal relationships. This points to the possibility of utilising peer support in programmes targeted at girls and young women. Advantages of such a method include increased self-confidence and empowerment, and greater trust and understanding (Pollack 1993).

The findings also point to the need for such programmes to be gender sensitive, since girls' experiences of violence are very much bound up with their experiences of being a girl. This message is one that will no doubt be familiar to regular readers of the *Probation Journal* as a number of recent articles have highlighted the discriminatory implications of generalised programmes and universal systems (e.g. Shaw and Hannah-Moffat, 2000). Practitioners and academics alike have argued for a more 'complex, dynamic and holistic' approach towards the development of effective practice (Gorman, 2001) and the need to 'localise' responses to criminal behaviour (McNeill, 2000). In relation to girls and violence, this means gearing interventions to the *specific* needs and experiences of the young women involved, rather than relying on programmes developed primarily for working with young men. It also means paying greater attention to the gendered context in which girls experience violence, both as perpetrators and victims.

To conclude, the 'View from the Girls' research was always intended as an exploratory study, designed to establish baseline data on girls' use and experiences of violence and the factors associated with their violent behaviour. The findings suggest that girls' relationships to violence need to be understood as arising from a complex set of social, material and gendered circumstances and cannot be addressed in isolation from other aspects of their lives. They also highlight the importance of developing reflexive rather than prescriptive programmes. Unless we listen to girls themselves, intervention programmes may miss their mark.

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Details of the study

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