

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

The “Sexual-Abuse-to-Prison-Pipeline” Among Justice-Involved Girls

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Juvenile Justice Involvement



It has long been recognized that boys account for a larger percentage of the juvenile justice population. As a consequence, girls have been historically underrepresented in samples of justice-involved populations (Kerig, 2018). Additionally, most theory, research, and treatment modalities for juvenile offending have been predominantly geared towards justice-involved boys. However, girls have been noted to make up a high percentage of the juvenile justice

population who commit non-serious offenses (Ehrmann, Hyland, & Puzanchera, 2019). Most recently, girls accounted for one-third of all juvenile arrests involving larceny-theft (39%), simple assault (36%), disorderly conduct offenses (37%) (Ehrmann et al., 2019; Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014).

While boys account for a large share of more serious offenses such as murder (94%), and robbery (89%) (Ehrmann et al., 2019), girls have consistently been more likely to be involved in status offenses, that is, less serious offenses such as shoplifting, running away, truancy, illegal sexual behavior (e.g. prostitution) or inappropriate sexual behavior (Acoca, 1999; Aledort, 2013; Zahn et al., 2010). Specifically, among the 600 estimated juvenile arrests in 2015, 76% of the prostitution-related offenses involved girls (Ehrmann et al., 2019). Girls of color are disproportionately affected by this trend and more than half (54%) of female cases handled in 2015 involved girls who identified as Black, Hispanic, American Indian or Asian (Ehrmann et al, 2019).

Girls of color are also particularly susceptible to implicit racial and gender bias at all points of contact with the system. For example, African American girls face “adultification” by system providers, that is, a particular bias in which they are viewed as older, more mature, and therefore more culpable than their counterparts (Baumle, 2018). These biases create an increase in behavioral monitoring and a further push into the juvenile justice system. African American girls are placed in residential placements at a rate of 123 per 100,000 girls; Native American girls at a rate of 179 per 100,000; and Latinas at a rate of 47 per 100,000. By comparison, non-Hispanic White American girls are confined at a rate of 37 per 100,000 girls (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2014).

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Sexual Abuse

This prevalence in juvenile justice involvement for girls of color is not actually a result of increased criminal activity or girls' violence (Baumle, 2018; Stevens et al., 2011). Instead, many contend that it is the result of a heightened and perhaps more aggressive response to non-serious offenses that are oftentimes rooted in the experience of abuse and trauma (American Bar Association and National Bar Association, 2001; Saar et al., 2015).¹

Girls in the juvenile justice system have been shown to disproportionately experience complex and multiple forms of trauma. In 2010, a nationally representative sample of justice-involved youth showed higher rates of multiple forms of victimization and complex trauma when compared to other girls (Turner et al., 2010). Consistent with these findings, Baglivio and colleagues (2014) found that girls in Florida's juvenile justice system reported having experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) at higher rates than boys. Sexual abuse in particular is significantly higher among girls, with one in four American girls experiencing some form of sexual violence before the age of 18 (Finkelhor et al., 2014). The rate of sexual abuse for girls is four times higher than for boys in the juvenile justice system (Baglivio et al., 2014) and 86-percent of incarcerated women have experienced sexual abuse at some point in their life (Baglivio et al., 2014; Baumle, 2018). Given these startling data, a collaboration between [Human Rights Project for Girls](#), [Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality](#), and [Ms. Foundation for Women](#) coined the "sexual abuse-to-prison pipeline," which posits that girls who experience sexual abuse are routed in the juvenile justice system *as a result* of their victimization (Baumle, 2018; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2012).

Association between Sexual Abuse and Juvenile Justice

Both theorists and researchers have hypothesized an association between the youth's own experience of sexual abuse, the process of discovery and disclosure, and subsequent reactions to this abuse. These experiences may lead to behavioral responses such as, engagement in criminal activity (Ryan, Leversee, & Lane, 2004). Even after accounting for identified risk factors, such as prior legal involvement and conduct problems, child sexual abuse has remained one of the most notable antecedents for justice-involved girls (Conrad et al., 2014). A recent study conducted by Anderson & Walerych (2019) interviewed juvenile court officers to understand the extent of trauma experienced by girls and the connection of that trauma to juvenile justice trajectories. Officers described girls' experiences of sexual abuse in 33% of cases and sexual exploitation in 17% of the cases and the officers stated that these traumatic experiences were oftentimes linked with family dysfunction, neglect, and a girl's own delinquent actions to meet their basic needs. This pathway to incarceration

¹ For a personal account of this, please read this [article](#)

can be due in part to the detention of girls who are victims of sex trafficking, girls who run away because of the abuse that they have experienced, and dual-status girls, or girls who are in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems (Saar et al., 2015).

The criminalization of their coping and survival strategic responses to trauma and abuse remains a significant problem for girls in the juvenile justice system. Unfortunately, many juvenile justice systems are ill-equipped to address girls' underlying trauma that potentially contributes to their behavior. These systems seem to fare even worse in acknowledging the needs of girls of color, whose behaviors are often viewed as malicious, suspicious, and mistrustful (Lopez & Nuño, 2016; Schaffner, 2008).

Implications

So where do we go next? Given that our current empirical evidence oftentimes excludes girls in the study samples or aggregates by gender, race, and ethnicity, it is difficult to know the available and supportive resources that are available to girls in the juvenile justice system, and specifically girls of color. Presently, theory and clinical practices tend to take on a neutral stance or are based on the boy's experience and behavior. As such, they make assumptions about what constitutes appropriate behavior by girls or young women and ignore the underlying root causes of behavior, such as trauma and abuse (Aledort, 2013). Zahn and colleagues (2009) reviewed the evidence-base on the effectiveness of gender-specific programming for juvenile justice-involved girls and only found nine gender-specific programs that were pre-post-test evaluated. Of those nine, only two of them were evaluated through randomized controlled research designs (meaning that they had a comparison group such as, receiving treatment as usual). This suggests that there is still work to be done and that the implementation and evaluation of more "gender-specific approaches" are warranted.

Programs/Supports Available for Girls

Although in limited fashion, a few initiatives have heeded this call to action and made progress in determining ways to implement effective gender-responsive interventions for girls in the juvenile justice system. As mentioned above, two programs have been evaluated through randomized controlled designs: The Reaffirming Young Sisters' Excellence (RYSE) and the Working to Insure and Nurture Girls Success (WINGS) program. Both programs are aimed at girls aged 12 to 18 years by using home visitation and community- and center-based services to address gender-based needs such as teen pregnancy, academics, drug and alcohol abuse, and vocational and career support. The RYSE program in particular was specifically designed for African American girls involved in the juvenile justice system. The evaluation of the program revealed that relative to girls who received probation as usual, RYSE girls were more than 50% more likely to complete probation. Also, African American and Hispanic girls

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had lower rates of recidivism as well (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2001; Zahn et al., 2009). The WINGS program was specifically geared towards girls minimally involved in the juvenile justice system and was shown to be effective at lowering recidivism rates 6 months after discharge while increasing the likelihood of girls attending school on a regular basis when compared to the comparison group (Burke et al., 2003). Although these findings are promising, it is unclear if either of these programs address trauma and victimization within the intervention practices.

Without trauma-related health treatment, girls may be more susceptible to attempting to deal with unresolved trauma through the use of coping strategies that increase their risk of recidivism, such as substance abuse, running away, or gang involvement (Saar et al., 2015). There is one evaluated intervention that seems to address trauma and victimization, though it has not yet been the subject of a rigorous RCT evaluation. This program serves high-risk girls aged 12-18 for approximately 5-6 months in a group home setting (Anderson et al., 2016). Known as, the “Gender-Responsive Intervention for Female Juvenile Offenders”, this intervention emphasizes safety, empowerment, comprehensiveness, and family and relationship support (National Institute of Justice (NIJ), 2017). It has been evaluated at two group homes in which personalized treatment plans were created, and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), the Thinking for a Change (T4C) behavior curriculum, and a gender-responsive program known as Girls Moving On (“GMO”) were implemented. Anderson and colleagues (2016) found that girls who received the gender-responsive intervention were less likely to recidivate within the 24-month follow-up period when compared to girls who received probation as usual.

We hope that this research brief provides an introductory overview of the “sexual abuse-to-prison pipeline,” which particularly affects girls of color. For a more in-depth look at this issue, see the resources listed below.

Want to see a particular topic in upcoming Research Highlights? Let us know [here](#).

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