

Females in the Juvenile Justice System: An Initial Review of Current Research

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I. Introduction

Rising statistics related to the number of young women and girls in the juvenile justice system have recently drawn the attention of public policy analysts and social service providers. Between 1992 and 1996, according to the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the number of juvenile females arrested for violent crimes increased by 25%. During the same period of time, there was no increase in the percentage of juvenile males arrested for similar offenses. OJJDP also reports that during these same years, while female arrests for property crime increased by 21%, male arrests for similar crimes decreased by 4%.

As a result of these and other statistics, the demand for a better understanding of services that might exist for girls on a primary, secondary, and tertiary level of intervention are increasing. Additionally, citizens and policy makers are calling for comprehensive needs assessments to identify gaps in service provision for girls and the development and implementation of gender specific programs to meet the needs of these girls.

This paper presents a brief review of recent developments and literature related to females in the juvenile justice system and provides some of the general data related to the increasing percentages of young women and girls in the justice system, strategies that are being incorporated into state and federal systems, and several of the pending research and action areas that will ideally impact some of the developments in the field. The paper was compiled for Family Talk, Inc. and the Girl Talk Forum by Dr. Kyle Farmbry of Grand Valley State University and the Polis Group, LLC.

The paper is divided into four sections. Sections one and two provide background on the need for more information related to young women and girls in the juvenile justice system. Much of the discussion focuses on the roles of the federal, state, and local governments in shaping current systems and potential funding opportunities in order to expand many of the gender specific programs.

Section three examines some of the various backgrounds of young women who

might be involved in the juvenile justice system. Most of the information was obtained from a 1998 report conducted by the National Center on Crime and Delinquency conducted on girls in the California justice system. This section also briefly covers some of the types of offenses that girls in the justice system appear to be more prone to having committed and looks to any differences in gender between those offenses that ultimately lead to placement in the juvenile justice system.

Section four presents areas for further research and research questions that should be useful for framing any next steps that Family Talk, The Girl Talk Forum, or others might take to explore possible strategies for decreasing the number of girls in the juvenile justice system in and around Kent County.

II. Background and Need: Girls and the Juvenile Justice System

The increasing interest in public policy circles and among various service providers on the growing numbers of young women and girls in the juvenile justice arena has ultimately created several opportunities to address this growing area of concern. In 1992, Congress amended the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974 in response to legislative awareness on the lack of gender specific services for females. The amendments that passed required that for states to qualify for formula grants under the JJDP Act, they must provide both an analysis of gender specific service needs and a strategy for providing needed service for both males and females in the state's juvenile justice system.

This requirement marked the first time that Congress used the JJDP Act as a vehicle for addressing the needs of juvenile female offenders. One of the side effects of the amendment was that it forced many states to scrutinize their own systems that related to adolescent females. Many local, state, and national policy-makers were forced to realize that many states do not have a clear picture of the services that currently exist within the state juvenile justice system pertaining to female juvenile offenders. As a result, some state and local jurisdictions have begun to examine various gender specific services in the juvenile systems and explore programmatic and systematic changes that might be implemented in the future. Most importantly, this push has demonstrated how much needs to be accomplished in terms of developing a gender aware approach to addressing juvenile justice issues in communities.

Additionally, increased awareness about the numbers, characteristics, and factors facing incarcerated young women and girls enables programs to track the impact of state and federal legislation on the lives of members of this community. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act for example requires that parents hold a job