

## Local Crime Prevention Strategies: A Monthly Program, Practice, and Policy Brief

### Girls and Crime

#### Introduction

In recent years, the increasing number of girls involved in the justice system has become a troubling trend. Although juvenile crime rates overall have decreased since 1994, the number and percentage of girls in the justice system have increased, making girls the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population (American Bar Association, 2001). In 1999, 670,000 females were arrested, accounting for 27 percent of all juvenile arrests (Child Welfare League of America, 2001).

Most girls in the juvenile court and the social service system are charged with status offenses. Status offenses are law violations for individuals of juvenile status, including running away, truancy, ungovernability, and liquor law violations. However, while girls are still less likely than boys to be involved in delinquent behavior, the number of young females committing violent delinquent acts has markedly increased in recent years. In 1996, 25 percent more female juveniles were arrested for violent crimes than in 1992, while the number of arrests of male juveniles remained unchanged. During this same period, the number of arrests for property crimes of female juveniles increased 21 percent whereas this figure for male juveniles declined 4 percent.

Research and data indicate that the justice system and policymakers must better address the special circumstances of girls and recognize that the nature and causes of girls' delinquency is different from that of boys. In fact, at-risk girls are too often misunderstood and services for girls in most areas are insufficient. Consequently, it is necessary to make an effort to better understand the unique needs of girls; to develop gender-specific community-based services for girls; and to develop effective intervention strategies to reduce their delinquent behavior.

#### Characteristics of At-risk and Delinquent Girls

According to a study conducted by Leslie Acoca and Associates in 1998 and reported in *No Place to Hide: Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Girls in the California Juvenile Justice System*, girls in the juvenile justice system share certain characteristics:

- *Family fragmentation.* The families are often characterized by poverty, death, violence, and a multigenerational pattern of incarceration.
- *Victimization outside the juvenile justice system.* Most have been victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse in their homes and communities.
- *Victimization inside the juvenile justice system.* The majority of girls are highly vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse even after they enter the justice system.
- *Health disorders.* Most experience one or more serious physical and/or mental health disorders.

- *Separation of incarcerated mothers from their children.* Many are mothers who already have been separated from their children.
- *Academic failure.* Failure in school, including suspension/expulsion; repeating one or more grades; and placement in a special classroom are almost universal among girls in the juvenile justice system.
- *The breaking point at early adolescence.* Highest vulnerability to academic failure, pregnancy, juvenile justice involvement, and out-of-home placement occurs between the ages of 12 and 15.
- *Non-violent offenders.* The majority of girls in the justice system are charged with minor status, property, or drug offenses.

Among many risk factors, a history of violent victimization is one of the most prevalent characteristics of female offenders (Acoca and Austin, 1996). According to a study conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency in 1998, 92 percent of the 200 female offenders interviewed had been emotionally, physically, or sexually abused (Acoca and Dedel, 1998). "Victimization is the first step along females' pathways into the juvenile justice system," a fact that is critical for understanding why girls commit offenses

Furthermore, a significant number of girls are joining gangs as a refuge from victimization at home, other family problems, and poverty. Girls are also closing the gender gap with males in the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

### **Offense Patterns and the Justice Process for Female Juvenile Offenders**

A survey by Acoca (1999) showed that the majority of juvenile female offenders were charged with less serious offenses such as property, drug, and status offenses than with violent offenses like murder and assault. In addition, most assault charges made for girls were the result of nonserious, mutual combat situations with parents.

The relatively small number of girls arrested for serious offenses, such as robbery, homicide, and weapon offenses, committed these crimes almost exclusively within the context of their relationships with codefendants. Frequently, girls followed the lead of male offenders or were involved in female-only or mixed-gender groups (including gangs) in committing their offenses. In addition, the availability of weapons increased girls' involvement with serious crime (The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration Task Force Report, 1998).

Although most female juvenile delinquents commit status offenses, such as truancy, running away, drinking, and curfew violations, the justice system has historically detained and committed these girls rather than examining the roots of their problems and providing appropriate community-based services. In fact, in many instances of offense, girls may be responding in self-protection to life-threatening situations, such as escaping sexual and/or physical abuse in the home. Research indicates that girls are more likely to be incarcerated for status and minor offenses and are more likely to be kept incarcerated for longer periods of time than boys, which shows a gender bias in the juvenile justice system.

### **Prevention and Intervention Strategies**

Offsetting the recent increased entry of girls into the juvenile justice system requires action at international, national, state, and local levels. A commitment to eliminating violence toward girls is critically important in the development of prevention and intervention strategies because victimization is one of the principal steps on the pathway to offending.

According to a 1998 study by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), there are a relatively small number of programs targeting female juvenile offenders. Among the few programs that do exist, most are small, relatively disorganized, and lack adequate funding. In particular, intensive family-based programs (residential, school, and in-home) that provide health, psychiatric, substance abuse, and academic services specifically for girls are lacking. In addition, services that are racially and culturally sensitive and programs that address girls' strengths and resiliencies are scarce as are programs that address at-risk girls in preadolescence (8 to 11 years old).

At the community level, effective programs need to be developed that engage the girls' families and are gender-specific. These family-focused programs should intervene in cases of domestic violence. Gender specific programming, which is critical, means taking into consideration the development needs that are unique to young women. For example, in comparison with boys, girls are more strongly affected by relationships with others, have lower self-esteem, and have greater tendencies to become preoccupied with perfection, to stop excelling to avoid competition, and to become less outspoken to avoid being disliked. Gender-specific programs are necessary, because most current programs for girls are modeled after programs for males and do not sufficiently meet the unique developmental, physiological, and emotional needs of girls (American Bar Association, 2001). In addition, studies indicate that law enforcement, judges, and child welfare professionals need to be trained to be familiar with the unique needs of girl offenders and their families.

The OJJDP also advocates the formation of early intervention programs for at-risk preadolescent girls between the ages of 8 and 11. A community-based, all-girls school setting that offers services such as family counseling, substance abuse prevention, specialized educational services (such as learning disabilities assessment), and mentoring services is recommended.

A long-term strategy involves encouraging healthy relationships between female offenders and their children, which can be aided by funding the Family Unity Demonstration Project (Amnesty International, 1999). The Family Unity Act enacted by Congress in 1998 recognizes the need for programs that promote bonding between incarcerated parents and their children for the future of public safety.

The American Bar Association and the National Bar Association also believe that most delinquent girls should be dealt with in culturally sensitive, gender-specific, developmentally sound programs. Their intervention strategies include recommending that policymakers and the organized bar work with local juvenile experts and programs in order to:

- promote community safety by increasing awareness factors that lead girls to delinquent behavior

- provide alternatives to detention and incarceration
- support effective gender-specific, developmentally sound, culturally sensitive practices with girls
- identify policies and practices that avoid placing girls into juvenile justice facilities for status offenses, charging girls with assault in family conflict situations, and over-utilizing secure facilities for girls
- re-evaluate practices for gender sensitivity and recommend alternatives
- facilitate communication and collaboration with federal, state, national, and community-based organizations
- study the flow of girls through the juvenile justice system and identify areas that can be improved
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- evaluate state and local policies and practices in regards to the gender impact of decision making.

The Valentine Foundation gives the following advice for developing programs and services for girls (Valentine Foundation and Women's Way, 1990):

- ask girls who they are, what their lives are like, and what they need
- allow girls to speak up and actively participate in the services they receive
- assist girls with their family relationships and help them deal with family problems
- maintain a diverse staff who reflect the girls in the program
- weave in a multicultural perspective
- teach girls how to cope with overcoming domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and substance abuse
- understand and help in maintaining the critical relationships in the girls' lives
- connect girls with at least one capable and nonexploitive adult in a continuing supportive relationship
- promote academic achievement and economic self-sufficiency
- allow staff time and opportunity to build trusting relationships with girls
- allow comfort of same-gender environments
- provide girls with mentors and role models
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- assist girls with childcare, transportation, and housing.

### **Highly Effective Programs**

Despite the paucity of programs targeting female juvenile offenders, a few programs have proved to be highly effective. These programs aim to offer services that are gender specific, culturally sensitive, and developmentally sound and that emphasize providing guidance for girls rather than punishing them.

*The PACE Center for Girls, Inc.*

The PACE (Practical, Academic, Cultural Education) Center for Girls, Inc., is a private, nonprofit organization founded in 1985 as an alternative to incarceration and detention of adolescent females in Jacksonville, Florida. Since its inception, PACE has provided services to over 5,000 at-risk girls; 93 percent of those who completed the program have not become reinvolvement with the juvenile justice system. The program has been replicated in 19 cities at the request of the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (Child Welfare League of America, 2001).

One key factor in PACE's success is understanding the relationship between victimization and female juvenile crime and recognizing that victimization is often the precursor to delinquent behavior. According to Dr. Lawanda Ravoira, President of PACE Center for Girls, Inc., one in four girls in the United States is sexually abused before age 18 whereas up to 92 percent in the juvenile justice system have experienced prior victimization. According to experts, victimized girls grow up with loss of self-esteem, loss of hope, loss of any real belief in the future, and loss of self-control. An internalization of that pain results in drug use, self-mutilation, and pregnancy, according to Ravoira. Ravoira states, "That early stage when girls are using drugs to deal with the pain of victimization and their feelings of loss of control becomes the gateway to delinquency." Therefore, PACE creates safe environments that encourage girls to share their stories with others and begin to heal psychologically. The program's success can also be attributed to its unique strength-based approach that focuses on the girls' potential rather than on past failures (Child Welfare League of America, 2001).

PACE aims to encourage girls to focus on the opportunity for a better future by providing highly effective and gender-responsive education and counseling (Child Welfare League of America, 2001). The following are the major program components:

- *Screening and intake.* Staff interviews each girl to assess her specific risk factors and the support she needs.
- *Education.* Each center provides academic programs, including remedial services, individual instruction, and specialized education plans.
- *Individualized attention.* The low student-to-staff ratio of 10:1 allows for consistent individualized attention.
- *Gender-specific life management skills enhancement.* This curriculum, called SPIRITED GIRLS!, teaches positive lifestyle choices and addresses career awareness as well as healthy lifestyles concerning sexuality, nutrition, and fitness.
- *Therapeutic services.* Individual treatment plans are developed based on a detailed psychosocial needs assessment
- *Parental involvement.* Staff members maintain contact with parents through home visits, office sessions, and telephone calls.
- *Community volunteer service.* Girls are required to volunteer for service projects in the community.
- *Transitional services.* PACE provides three years of follow-up for all girls who attend for

more than one month.

#### *The Female Intervention Team*

The Female Intervention Team (FIT) provides gender-specific programs for delinquent girls involved in the Baltimore, Maryland juvenile justice system. The team was founded in 1992 and placed in the first runner-up category for the Harvard School Award for Innovations in Government in 1995.

The FIT team is made up of 13 juvenile counselors/case managers and one juvenile counselor supervisor. Ten of the case managers deal with an average caseload of 35 girls, two case managers investigate and report on new adjudicated cases, and one case manager organizes FIT groups and programs. Team members, who are varying ages and both male and female, are also responsible for planning monthly community or office-based group activities. The male and female staff is important because it allows girls to observe relationships between men and women that are neither sexual nor abusive. FIT's various ongoing programs include a career-enrichment program, a computer repair and building class, a pregnancy prevention program, a teen parenting group, a substance abuse group, and a conflict resolution class.

According to FIT records, 50 percent fewer females from Baltimore City were committed to Maryland's secure commitment facility two years after the program began. The rate decreased 95 percent the following year. The team concept has been critical to FIT's success. Staff members work, eat, and discuss difficult cases together, as well as develop solutions as a team.

#### **Conclusion**

The increasing number of girls becoming involved in the juvenile justice system is a serious social problem. Offsetting this trend requires effective prevention and intervention programs that are based on an understanding of the unique characteristics of at-risk and delinquent girls and their pathway into crime. Several effective gender-specific, developmentally sound, culturally sensitive, and family- and community-based programs exist, yet more such programs are needed. Federal, state, and local governments; community groups; churches; and other private organizations can work together to provide the necessary resources for the development and implementation of more successful prevention and intervention programs. Experts also recommend changes in the justice system to emphasize more guidance and prevention for juvenile female offenders.

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**From:** "Minson, Colleen" <CMinson@ncpc.org>  
**To:** "Addie Richburg (E-mail)" <arichburg@bop.gov>  
**Date:** 10/11/02 1:48PM  
**Subject:** FW: The Latest Program, Practice, Policy Brief

Addie,

Here's a better electronic copy of that piece on girls and crime.

Colleen

> -----Original Message-----

> From: Johnson, Ryan

> Sent: Friday, October 11, 2002 1:36 PM

> To: \*Team Leaders

> Subject: The Latest Program, Practice, Policy Brief

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> I've attached the Coalition's latest Policy brief. It was distributed

> yesterday to the Coalition. We have already heard some nice feedback.

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> Ryan

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