

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 Acocha 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.