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The Myth of Mean Girls

By MIKE MALES and MEDA-CHESNEY LIND APRIL 1, 2010

IF nine South Hadley, Mass., high school students — seven of them girls — are proved to have criminally bullied another girl who then committed suicide, as prosecutors have charged, they deserve serious legal and community condemnation.

However, many of the news reports and inflamed commentaries have gone beyond expressing outrage at the teenagers involved and instead invoked such cases as evidence of a modern epidemic of “mean girls” that adults simply fail to comprehend. Elizabeth Scheibel, the district attorney in the South Hadley case, declined to charge school officials who she said were aware of the bullying because of their “lack of understanding of harassment associated with teen dating relationships.” A People magazine article headlined “Mean Girls” suggested that a similar case two years ago raised “troubling questions” about “teen violence” and “cyberspace wars.” Again and again, we hear of girls hitting, brawling and harassing.

But this panic is a hoax. We have examined every major index of crime on which the authorities rely. None show a recent increase in girls’ violence; in fact, every reliable measure shows that violence by girls has been plummeting for years. Major offenses like murder and robbery by girls are at their lowest levels in four decades. Fights, weapons possession, assaults and violent injuries by and toward girls have been plunging for at least a decade.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Uniform Crime Reports, based on reports from more than 10,000 police agencies, is the most reliable source on arrests by sex and age. From 1995 to 2008, according to the F.B.I., girls’ arrest rates for violent

offenses fell by 32 percent, including declines of 27 percent for aggravated assault, 43 percent for robbery and 63 percent for murder. Rates of murder by girls are at their lowest levels in at least 40 years.

The National Crime Victimization Survey, a detailed annual survey of more than 40,000 Americans by the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics, is considered the most reliable measure of crime because it includes offenses not reported to the police. From 1993 through 2007, the survey reported significant declines in rates of victimization of girls, including all violent crime (down 57 percent), serious and misdemeanor assaults (down 53 percent), robbery (down 83 percent) and sex offenses (down 67 percent).

Public health agencies like the National Center for Health Statistics confirm huge declines in murder and violent assaults of girls. For example, as the number of females ages 10 to 19 increased by 3.4 million, murders of girls fell from 598 in 1990 to 376 in 2006. Rates of murders of and by adolescent girls are now at their lowest levels since 1968 — 48 percent below rates in 1990 and 45 percent lower than in 1975.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics' Intimate Partner Violence in the United States survey, its annual Indicators of School Crime and Safety, the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future survey and the Centers for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance all measure girls' violent offending and victimization. Virtually without exception, these surveys show major drops in fights and other violence, particularly relationship violence, involving girls over the last 15 to 20 years. These surveys also indicate that girls are no more likely to report being in fights, being threatened or injured with a weapon, or violently victimizing others today than in the first surveys in the 1970s.

These striking improvements in girls' personal safety, including from rape and relationship violence, directly contradict recent news reports that girls suffer increasing danger from violence by their female and male peers alike.

There is only one measure that would in any way indicate that girls' violence has risen, and it is both dubious and outdated. F.B.I. reports show assault arrests of girls under age 18 increased from 6,300 in 1981 to a peak of 16,800 in 1995, then dropped

sharply, to 13,300 in 2008. So, at best, claims that girls' violence is rising apply to girls of 15 to 25 years ago, not today.

Even by this measure, it's not girls who have gotten more violent faster — it's middle-aged men and women, the age groups of the many authors and commentators disparaging girls. Among women ages 35 to 54, F.B.I. reports show, felony assault arrests rocketed from 7,100 in 1981 to 28,800 in 2008. Assault arrests among middle-aged men also more than doubled, reaching 100,500 in 2008. In Northampton, the county seat a few miles from South Hadley, domestic violence calls to police more than tripled in the last four years to nearly 400 in 2009. Why, then, don't we see frenzied news reports on "Mean Middle-Agers"?

What's more, the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention concluded that girls' supposed "violent crime increase" in the '80s and '90s resulted from new laws and policies mandating arrests for domestic violence and minor youth offenses "that in past years may have been classified as status offenses (e.g., incorrigibility)" but "can now result in an assault arrest." Thus, the Justice Department found, increased numbers of arrests "are not always related to actual increases in crime."

This mythical wave of girls' violence and meanness is, in the end, contradicted by reams of evidence from almost every available and reliable source. Yet news media and myriad experts, seemingly eager to sensationalize every "crisis" among young people, have aroused unwarranted worry in the public and policy arenas. The unfortunate result is more punitive treatment of girls, including arrests and incarceration for lesser offenses like minor assaults that were treated informally in the past, as well as alarmist calls for restrictions on their Internet use.

Why, in an era when slandering a group of people based on the misdeeds of a few has rightly become taboo, does it remain acceptable to use isolated incidents to berate modern teenagers, particularly girls, as "mean" and "violent" and "bullies"? That is, why are we bullying girls?

Correction: April 5, 2010

A biographical note accompanying an Op-Ed article on Friday, about violence by girls, misstated the roles of the authors in a forthcoming book

on gender and violence. Meda-Chesney Lind is a co-editor of the book; Mike Males is a contributor to it.

Mike Males is senior researcher at the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. Meda-Chesney Lind, a professor of women's studies at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, is the co-editor of the forthcoming "Fighting for Girls: New Perspectives on Gender and Violence."

A version of this op-ed appears in print on April 2, 2010, on page A23 of the New York edition with the headline: The Myth of Mean Girls.

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