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# Girls Study Group

*Understanding and Responding to Girls' Delinquency*

J. Robert Flores, Administrator

## The Girls Study Group—Charting the Way to Delinquency Prevention for Girls

By Margaret A. Zahn, Stephanie R. Hawkins, Janet Chiancone, and Ariel Whitworth

Juvenile delinquency can become a pathway to adult offending. Delinquency experts search for ways to counter delinquency before it starts, providing intervention for juveniles in high-risk situations—such as those with severe economic disadvantages or living in high-crime neighborhoods.

However, the majority of juveniles arrested are male, which means that a good deal of research on juvenile delinquents has been performed on a mostly male population that does not account for girls' and boys' differences. Despite much research on the causes of boys' delinquency, few studies have examined which girls become delinquent or why. Additionally, intervention and treatment programs have been traditionally designed with boys in mind, and little is known about how well girls respond to these interventions.

In the 1990s, a surge of girls' arrests brought female juvenile crimes to the country's attention. Girls' rates of arrest for some crimes increased faster than boys' rates of arrest. By 2004, girls accounted for 30 percent of all juvenile arrests, but delinquency experts did not know whether these trends reflected changes in girls' behavior or changes in arrest patterns. The juvenile justice field was struggling to understand how best to respond to the needs of the girls entering the system.

To determine the reason behind these increasing arrest rates, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) convened the Girls Study Group (see "About the Girls Study Group"). The group sponsored a series of studies to gain a better understanding of girls' involvement in delinquency and guide the development, testing, and dissemination of strategies that would reduce



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incidents of delinquency and violence among girls.

The Girls Study Group (GSG) wanted to know—

- Which girls become delinquent?
- What factors protect girls from delinquency?
- What factors put girls at risk for delinquency?
- What pathways lead to girls' delinquency?
- What programs are most effective in preventing girls' delinquency?
- How should the criminal justice system respond to girls' delinquency?

The series of studies outlined in this Bulletin describe the ways in which the group worked to understand and respond to girls' delinquency. Using a combination of literature reviews, dataset analysis, and program and instrument reviews, they conducted a series of studies (each outlined in detail in forthcoming OJJDP Bulletins). These studies should shed light on why girls become delinquent, and provide a research foundation for the juvenile justice community to consider what treatment and intervention programs are most effective for girls. These studies include:

1. **Violence by Teenage Girls: Trends and Context.** This Bulletin describes recent trends in girls' offending and examines the settings in which girls commit crimes.
2. **Causes and Correlates of Girls' Delinquency.** This Bulletin examines the personal, family, peer, school, and community

factors that can lead to delinquency.

3. **Resilient Girls—Factors that Protect Against Delinquency.** This Bulletin examines whether four factors—a caring adult, school connectedness, school success, and religiosity—can protect girls from delinquency.
4. **Suitability of Assessment Instruments for Delinquent Girls.** This Bulletin determines whether current risk-assessment and treatment-focused instruments are appropriate for use with girls. It also provides guidance to practitioners on how to select instruments for use.
5. **Girls' Delinquency Programs—An Evidence-Based Review.** This Bulletin reviews girls' delinquency programs and determines whether they effectively intervene in delinquency trajectories.
6. **Developmental Sequences of Girls' Delinquent Behavior.** This Bulletin investigates the different patterns of delinquent behaviors that girls become involved in, and provides insight into the life pathways that lead to girls' delinquent behavior.

This document will provide highlights of the findings that are outlined in detail in the Bulletins described above. Most are forthcoming and will be available through the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (<http://www.fsu.edu/~crimdo/jjclearinghouse/jjclearinghouse.html>) and published on the OJJDP (<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org>) and Girls Study Group (<http://girlsstudygroup.rti.org>) Web sites.

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## Violence by Teenage Girls: Trends and Context

The upswing in girls' violence in the late 20th century had many people in the juvenile justice community concerned. They wanted to know what factors influenced girls' offending, and what kinds of programs and policies could reduce girls' violence.

To answer these questions, OJJDP convened the Girls Study Group. The Group's initial research project examined rates of girls' arrests, delinquency, and victimization. Researchers examined arrest data from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, delinquency surveys from the Monitoring the Future study, and victimization surveys from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey.

This research resulted in the *Trends and Context* Bulletin, which provides answers to a number of questions:

### How have girls' and boys' arrest rates increased in the past decade?

- Girls account for a smaller proportion of overall juvenile arrests than boys, but arrest patterns for both groups have diverged over the past decade. Between 1996 and 2005, overall arrests decreased for both groups. However, this decrease was greater for boys than girls.
- Notably, between 1996 and 2005, girls' arrests for simple assault increased 24 percent.

### Are girls actually committing more crimes?

- Despite increasing arrest rates in the past decade, self-report data suggest that girls' behavior has not changed. In fact, self-report data suggest girls' and boys' assault rates have dropped in recent years.

### What would explain the increasing arrest rates for girls?

Arrest laws and changes in law enforcement policy appear to have had more of an impact on arrest rates than changes in girls' behavior. Possible explanations for this include:

- Changes in local law enforcement policies that lowered the threshold for reporting assaults or classifying assaults as aggravated.
- Some status offenses involving a domestic dispute between a girl and her parent or sibling could now be classified as simple assault and could result in arrest. This sort of arrest is an unintended consequence of "mandatory arrest" laws in cases of domestic violence.
- Schools' zero-tolerance policies toward youth violence may have increased police referral for fights involving girls.

To test some of the possible explanations outlined above, the Girls Study Group conducted a special analysis that looked at local mandatory and pro-arrest policies to determine if there were indications that these had an impact on the increasing number of girls' arrests. Their findings indicate that mandatory and pro-arrest policies increased the likelihood of arrest for both girls and boys, but the effects appear stronger for girls. This may be explained by the fact that family conflict accounts for a larger proportion of girls' offending than of boys' offending.<sup>1</sup>

## Causes and Correlates of Girls' Delinquency

Girls' delinquency has become an increasing dilemma in recent years, in part because of higher arrest rates, and in part because little research to date has focused on female juvenile

### About the Girls Study Group

In 2004, OJJDP convened the Girls Study Group, an interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners who would work together to develop a comprehensive research foundation for understanding and responding to girls' involvement in delinquency.

Through a competitive process, RTI International was selected to lead the Girls Study Group Project.

The group includes experts from the fields of sociology, psychology, criminology, and gender studies, as well as legal practitioners and girls' program development coordinators.

The Girls Study Group research consists of—

- Reviewing literature on girls' delinquency.
- Analyzing secondary datasets.
- Assessing programs that target female delinquents.
- Reviewing risk assessment and treatment-focused instruments for delinquent girls.

For more information about the Girls Study Group, see <http://girlsstudygroup.rti.org>.

delinquents. By 2004, females made up 25 percent of all juvenile arrests for aggravated assault, and 33 percent of juvenile arrests for other assaults. So why do some girls become delinquent? A great deal of research has examined the factors involved in male delinquency, but the factors involved in female delinquency remained largely unknown.

To understand the causes of female delinquency, the Girls Study Group reviewed more than 2,300 social science articles and book chapters that examine factors involved in delinquent behavior for girls ages 11 to 18. They also examined factors that protect girls from becoming delinquent. They found that while certain factors predict or prevent delinquency in both sexes, a number of factors influence girls' behavior more strongly than boys' behavior.

The factors that equally increase the risk of delinquency for both sexes include—

- The family's dynamics (i.e., how parents supervise and monitor a child, family history of criminal behavior, child maltreatment).
- A child's involvement in school.
- The neighborhood a child lives in (e.g., poverty level, crime rate, employment rate).
- The level of availability of community-based programs.

Some factors increase or decrease a girl's risk of delinquency more than a boy's, including—

- **Early puberty.** Early puberty increases girls' risk for delinquency, particularly if they come from disadvantaged neighborhoods and have dysfunctional families. This disparity between biological

and social maturity can lead to increased conflict with parents or negative associations with older boys or men.

- **Sexual abuse or maltreatment.** Compared to boys, girls experience more sexual victimization overall, including sexual assaults, rapes, and sexual harassment. However, all types of maltreatment (sexual, physical, and neglect) can increase the risk of delinquency for both sexes.
- **Depression and anxiety.** Depression and anxiety disorders have been associated with delinquency. Girls receive these diagnoses more frequently than boys.
- **Romantic partners.** When a youth's boyfriend or girlfriend commits a crime, he or she may also engage in delinquent behavior. For less serious crimes, girls are influenced more by their boyfriends than boys by their girlfriends. For serious crimes, they are equally affected.

### Resilient Girls—Factors That Protect Against Delinquency

Some children manage to achieve success despite the difficulties they encounter in life. This ability to positively adapt to negative situations is called resilience. Positive experiences in life can strengthen a child's ability to become resilient to the difficult situations—abuse, neglect, poverty, witnessing violence—that can lead to delinquency.

An investigation by the Girls Study Group examined whether experiencing protective factors during adolescence could keep girls from

offending. These protective factors included—

- Support from a caring adult.
- Success in school—as measured by grade point average.
- School connectedness—a positive perception of the school environment and positive interactions with people at school.
- Religiosity—how important religion was to the girl.

The researchers analyzed self-report surveys from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. They found:

- **Caring adult.** Girls who had a caring adult in their lives during adolescence were less likely to commit status or property offenses, sell drugs, join gangs, or commit simple or aggravated assault during adolescence. They also were less likely to commit simple assault as young adults.
- **School connectedness.** Girls who experienced school connectedness were not protected or at increased risk for delinquency during adolescence and young adulthood, with one exception—girls who experienced school connectedness during adolescence were more likely to become involved in aggravated assault in young adulthood.
- **School success.** Girls who experienced success in school during adolescence committed fewer status and property offenses and were less likely to join gangs in adolescence. School success helped protect them from involvement in simple and aggravated assault in adolescence and young adulthood. However, these girls were more likely to commit property offenses in young adulthood.

- **Religiosity.**<sup>2</sup> Girls who placed a high importance on religion during adolescence were less likely to sell drugs in early adolescence.

Researchers additionally examined the interaction between childhood risk factors and protective factors during adolescence on a child's propensity toward delinquent behavior. Although some of the protective factors helped girls not to engage in delinquent behavior, others could not mitigate the influence of risk factors that girls had endured since childhood. Their findings highlight the importance of considering girls' life histories when developing interventions for girls at high risk for delinquency.

## Suitability of Assessment Instruments for Delinquent Girls

When girls are arrested, referred to court for delinquent behavior, held in a secure facility, or released from confinement, juvenile justice practitioners need a way to examine the risks that these girls pose to those around them and the community at large. They also must determine how to identify the girls' treatment needs and make appropriate processing decisions (e.g., adjudication, detention).

Practitioners in the juvenile justice system typically use standardized instruments to make such decisions. These instruments help to systematize decisionmaking criteria across the juvenile justice system and make the decision process more consistent and objective. A number of instruments have been developed for screening and assessing at-risk and justice-involved youth, but many have not taken gender into consideration in their development.<sup>3</sup>

A group of researchers in the Girls Study Group reviewed 143 risk assessment and treatment-focused instruments, and examined whether they could appropriately determine youths' risks and needs. They wanted to know if the instruments had favorable gender-based performance, which includes—

- Gender-based instrument development (e.g., gender-specific items, scoring, or norms).
- Favorable gender-based analysis (e.g., research findings show it is equally effective for girls and boys).

The analysis examined instruments in four categories:

- Risk and risk/needs assessment instruments.
- Global needs assessment instruments.<sup>4</sup>
- Substance abuse instruments.
- Mental health instruments.

In this Bulletin, the authors list those instruments in each category with favorable gender-based performance. Overall, out of 143 instruments examined, 73 instruments had favorable gender-based performance. Of these 73 instruments, 28 offered gender-based instrument development, 25 had favorable gender-based analysis, and 20 met both criteria. The authors report that mental health instruments were most sensitive to gender differences. Many instruments did not have information on gender-based performance, and some were less favorable for girls.

Practitioners choosing an instrument for assessment in their community

should consider the instrument's purpose, gender performance, cost, and local validation.

The Bulletin also provides detail on what practitioners should consider when selecting and administering instruments. It describes how to access further information about the many instruments reviewed.

## Girls' Delinquency Programs—An Evidence-Based Review

Many States and communities design programs to prevent and treat female delinquency. However, researchers are unsure how effective these programs are. To examine how effectively these programs work, the Girls Study Group reviewed 26 promising and model programs in the Blueprints for Violence Prevention<sup>5</sup> database and completed a nationwide review of 61 girls' delinquency programs.

The research team reviewed the 61 girls' delinquency programs using the Office of Justice Programs' What Works Repository, and classified them based on evidence of their effectiveness. The classification framework that the authors used places programs in one of six levels of effectiveness:

- **Effective.** Effective programs have an experimental research design (i.e., a randomized controlled trial) that demonstrates a significant and sustained effect. The program should have been externally replicated at least once, with an implementation team and site separate from the original study.
- **Effective with reservation.** These programs have an experimental research design that demonstrates

a significant and sustained effect. The program should have at least one successful replication. Reservations occur either because the program has only an internal replication, or because it has an external replication with modest results.

- **Promising.** These programs have either—
  - An experimental design without a successful replication.
  - A prospective, quasi-experimental research design (i.e., with no random assignment) that uses well-matched comparison groups. These programs have significant and sustained effects.
- **Inconclusive evidence.** These programs may have adequately rigorous research designs, but not sustained effects. Or they may have contradictory findings and not enough evidence demonstrating that the program is effective or ineffective.
- **Insufficient evidence.** These programs have a quasi-experimental design that lacks sufficient methodological rigor or a pre-post test design,<sup>6</sup> or involve a purely descriptive evaluation.<sup>7</sup>
- **Ineffective.** These programs have an experimental or quasi-experimental research design that failed to demonstrate a significant effect in an internal study or in a replication.

The nationwide review of girls' delinquency programs found that—

- Only 17 of the 61 programs cataloged had published evaluations.

- No programs could be rated effective, effective with reservation, or ineffective.
- Most programs could be rated as having insufficient evidence.

Two key findings from the review of girls' delinquency programs were that more evaluations are needed and many of these programs are no longer in existence, which suggests a lack of program sustainability.

The review of programs in the Blueprints for Violence Prevention database found that out of 26 promising and model programs, only 8 program evaluations analyzed whether program outcomes differed for boys and girls. However, 23 of these programs were equally effective for boys and girls. The programs targeted multiple risk factors for delinquency, had treatment plans that focused on the individual participant's needs, and developed connections between the program participants and resources in the community.<sup>8</sup>

### Developmental Sequences of Girls' Delinquent Behavior

As girls develop, their experiences and interactions impact their decisions and behavior. Some of these experiences and interactions may contribute to positive developmental outcomes and others may support involvement in negative behaviors.

The Girls Study Group explored the possibility that distinct developmental pathways could influence girls' delinquent behaviors. The resulting Bulletin may help researchers develop programs or policies that stop female delinquency before it starts.

To investigate the developmental pathways that lead to delinquency, the Girls Study Group analyzed data from two longitudinal studies of girls between ages 7 and 17—the Denver Youth Study,<sup>9</sup> which included 807 girls and the Fast Track Project,<sup>10</sup> which included 317 girls. The authors examined the lifetime prevalence of the types of delinquent behaviors for which girls were involved, including running away, truancy, public disorderliness, minor assault,<sup>11</sup> minor property offense, serious property offense, serious assault, drug sales, alcohol use, and drug use; and the developmental sequences of delinquent behavior followed by different groups of girls over the 7–17 age period.

The authors found that girls followed different developmental sequences. No one sequence or pathway of delinquent behaviors applied to a majority of girls. Additionally, a sizable proportion of girls were involved in delinquent offenses before middle school. Girls involved in more serious offending tended to return to a lower level of status or public disorder offending or returned to a nondelinquent status after a short time.

### Discussion

The research conducted by the Girls Study Group has yielded very important information for OJJDP and the juvenile justice field. Some of the findings have confirmed earlier research and anecdotal information, while other findings have contradicted many of the long-held beliefs about how girls become delinquent and how best to address their needs.

One of the first findings—and in some ways the most surprising

finding—is that girls are not more violent than in previous years. The comparative analysis of official FBI data to self-report data revealed that, in fact, a change in how the juvenile justice system is responding to girls' behavior is largely responsible for the increased number of girls entering the system. Another surprising finding is that the increase in girls' arrests appears to be, in part, an unintended result of relatively new mandatory or pro-arrest policies put in place to protect victims of domestic violence. These are good policies, and necessary to protect victims. However, this unexpected outcome highlights the need to work with law enforcement to identify appropriate responses to conflict between girls and their family members, and for communities to support and provide families with access to family strengthening and mediation programs that provide intervention (rather than arrest).

Another key finding of the study group is that girls and boys experience many of the same delinquency risk factors. Although some risk factors are more gender sensitive, in general, focusing on general risk and protective factors for all youth seems a worthwhile effort. When it comes to providing intervention programming, some unique factors should be considered for girls. As with all delinquency prevention and intervention efforts, however, the focus should be on the individual youth and her specific needs and strengths. This is why using the appropriate risk assessment tools is important, whether the youth is a girl or a boy.

Perhaps the most significant finding of the Girls Study Group is that there continues to be a lack of reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information about good prevention and

intervention programming for girls. Clearly, a concerted effort is needed to address the lack of evidence-based programs for the juvenile justice field, and the lack of programming for girls specifically. It is troubling that of all the girls' programs reviewed by the Girls Study Group, the majority of them were rated "insufficient" evidence and had not been evaluated to the degree that they could be considered "effective." More troubling is the fact that many of these programs do not have the resources to conduct rigorous evaluations.

In moving ahead, the Girls Study Group findings will provide OJJDP with the foundation needed to move ahead on a comprehensive program of information dissemination, training, technical assistance, and programming regarding girls' delinquency prevention and intervention. The findings of the group may assist States and communities in developing their own efforts to address girls' delinquency.

## Endnotes

1. Strom, K., T. Warner, L. Tichavsky, and M. Zahn (in development). Policing daughters: The role of domestic violence arrest policies in child-parent conflicts.
2. Religiosity describes how important religion is to someone. In this study, answers to three questions—the frequency of praying, the frequency of attending religious events, and the girls' perception of the importance of religion—defined girls' religiosity.
3. For instance, they may have been developed using a primarily male population.
4. These instruments provide a broad-based assessment of areas that may need followup.
5. See the Blueprints for Violence Prevention Web site at <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/>. The review of Blueprints for Violence Prevention programs was completed in July 2006. Updates to program ratings may have been added to the database since this date.
6. A pre-post design measures program outcomes by comparing perceptions or behaviors at the end of a program (i.e., post-program) to some measurement before the program begins (i.e., pre-program).
7. A purely descriptive design does not have rigorous methodology. The focus of descriptive research is to provide an accurate narrative of what is occurring.
8. These connections can serve as a support mechanism for participants.
9. For more information about the Denver Youth Study, see: <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/programs/ProgSummary.asp?pi=19> and <http://www.casnet.org/library/delinquency/youth-svy.htm>.
10. See the following three studies:
  - 1) Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. 1992. A developmental and clinical model for the prevention of conduct disorders: The FAST Track program. *Development and Psychopathology* 4:509–527.

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- 2) Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. 2000. Merging universal and indicated prevention programs: The Fast Track model. *Addictive Behaviors* 25:913-927.
- 3) Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. 2007. Fast Track randomized controlled trial to prevent externalizing psychiatric disorders: Findings from grades 3 to 9. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 46:1250-1262.

### 11. Denver Youth Study only.

### Acknowledgments

Margaret A. Zahn was a Principal Scientist at RTI International and a professor at North Carolina State University during her Girls Study Group directorship, and is currently Acting Deputy Director of Research and Evaluation at the National Institute of Justice.

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