



Rising Involvement of Girls in the System

For many years, research into the causes of delinquency concentrated primarily on boys since many more boys than girls entered the juvenile justice system. As a result, programming was tailored to what was believed to be effective in treating boys. Although the juvenile crime rate for boys is declining nationwide, it is increasing for girls at an alarming rate. Girls have been arrested most often for shoplifting and running away, but arrests for violent crimes such as aggravated and simple assault increased by 36 percent among girls between 1994 and 1998 (OJJDP Fact Sheet, *What About Girls?*, September 1998). See the figure to the right for an illustration of the percent change in juvenile arrests 1990-99 in the

United States (as cited by the American Bar Association, *Justice by Gender*, May 2001).

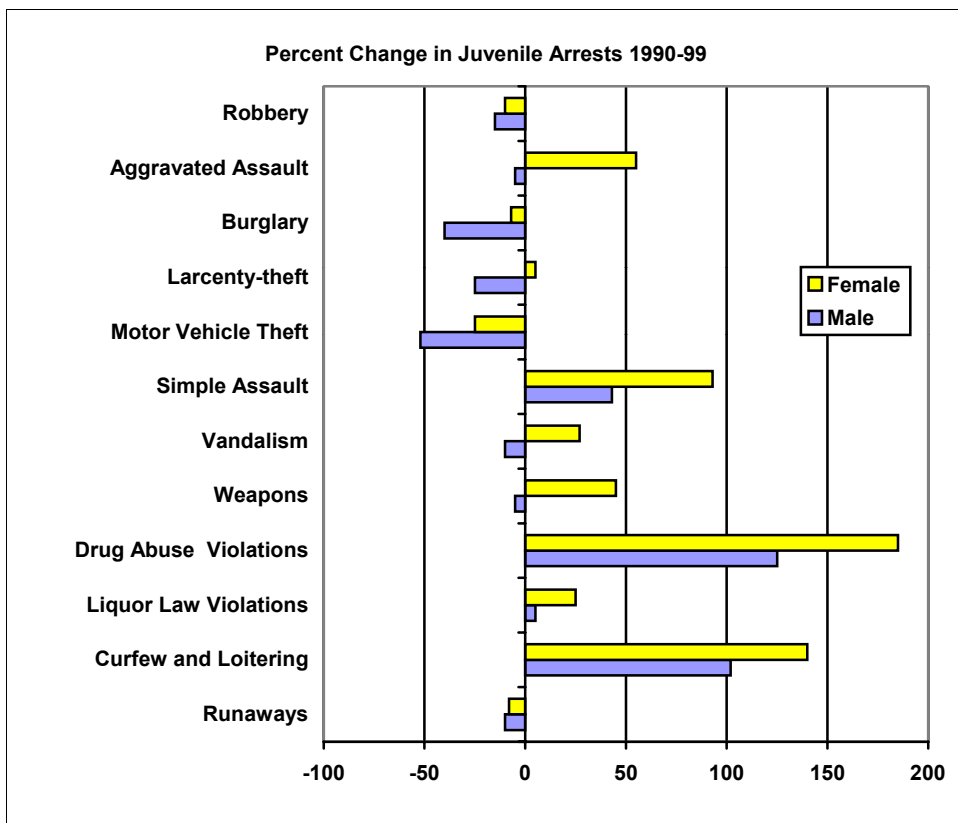
Girls and boys develop differently physically and emotionally during adolescence and have gender-specific needs. While boys tend

to get in fights or generally be disruptive, girls tend to cope by self destructive behaviors, such as eating disorders, self-mutilation and suicide.

Depression is thought to be a stronger predictor of delinquency in girls than boys. When these needs are not met along a developmental continuum, girls are more at risk for entering and progressing through the juvenile justice system.

Logically, programming should address these different developmental milestones with appropriate gender specific services. Programs should be comprehensive and deal with individual needs. They should also consider that minority girls are disproportionately represented and that girls

have fewer placement options than boys that address their needs. Fewer community placements can lead to confinement for relatively minor offenses—sometimes being held for what is called “their own protection”. Teen mothers are often separated from their children, eliminating any chance of bonding.



Recognizing the Need for Gender-Specific Services

During the 1992 reauthorization of the federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, the U.S. Congress added a Challenge provision so that states may receive grants for “developing and adopting policies to prohibit gender bias and placement and treatment of young offenders” and/or “establishing programs to ensure that female youth have access to the full range of health and mental health services, treatment for physical or sexual assault and abuse, self-defense instruction, education in parenting, education in general, and other training and vocational services.” (JJDP Act, 1992). Merely painting the walls of a facility or program pink, without changes in the philosophy and without implementing research-based best-practice programming, will not respond to girls in the most effective manner. While societal factors such as poverty, homelessness, inadequate education, lack of jobs that pay a living wage, deteriorating families and communities and lack of affordable health care contribute to children entering the juvenile justice system, Congress has challenged states to examine factors surrounding how girls enter the system and then to take proactive steps to ensure appropriate treatment.

The Louisiana legislature passed HCR 94 and SCR 165 during the 2001 regular legislative session. Both of these look at system wide changes aimed at reforming the state’s juvenile justice system. The state is positioned to examine its services and make appropriate changes based on best practices for both boys and girls.

Risk Factors with Serious Implications for Girls

Although the risk factors for boys and girls are similar, girls are affected by them differently. Several specific factors put girls at greater risk of engaging in delinquent behavior.

Sexual abuse—girls are three times as likely as boys to have been sexually abused, which can leave girls with reduced self esteem, inability to trust, academic failure, and pregnancy. Left untreated, girls may abuse substances, run away or become violent toward their perpetrators. *An Overview of Research on Girls and Violence*, 1999, reveals that sexual abuse also contributes to girls' negative view of other females. Girls may tend to internalize their beliefs of inferiority and act aggressively toward other girls.

Substance abuse—substance abuse worsens other factors that may put a girl at risk of delinquency. Substance abuse co-occurs with other problems such as mental illness and academic failure in higher rates than for boys.

Teen pregnancy—while both boys and girls engage in sexual behavior, the effect of pregnancy on girls may be the result of sexual abuse and often translates to a life of poverty. Also, children of teen mothers are more likely to be abused and neglected and to end up in prison. *Guiding Principles for Promising Female Programming: An Inventory of Best Practices*, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998

Best Practices for Gender-Specific Programming

Gender specific programming recognizes that girls in the system may have been affected by sexism, victimization, poverty and racism. Community Research Associates (1997) supports the least restrictive programming close to the girls' homes to facilitate reentry. The Valentine Foundation (1990) has identified elements of ef-

fective programming for girls:

- ◆ Space that is physically and emotionally safe
- ◆ Opportunities to develop healthy relationships with other women
- ◆ Time to talk and nurture relationships
- ◆ Culturally relevant programming
- ◆ Mentors
- ◆ Education about women's health issues
- ◆ Opportunities to create positive changes for individual girls
- ◆ Giving girls input into program design, implementation and evaluation
- ◆ Adequate financing to operate a comprehensive program
- ◆ Involvement with schools to incorporate the contributions women have made

Quotable Quote

“Gender specific programming for girls is a comprehensive approach to female delinquency rooted in the experience of girls. It aims to help girls already in trouble, while preventing future delinquency among girls who are at risk. It bridges theory-into-practice by combining female adolescent theory with juvenile practices”—Sheila R. Peters, Ph.D. in *Guiding Principles for Promising Female Programming: An Inventory of Best Practices*, OJJDP, October 1998

The following three programs have been designed with the needs of girls in mind, focusing on individualized treatment plans and positive outcomes.

Pace Center for Girls, Jacksonville, Florida—a day treatment program offering comprehensive prevention, early intervention, high school education and long term follow-up to girls ages

12-18, who are considered at risk for delinquency.

Pulaski County Juvenile Court Teen Parenting Program, Little Rock, Arkansas— an early intervention/probation program that uses volunteer probation officers to supervise first-time and nonviolent offenders who are also teen parents. The use of volunteers enables girls to bond with a caring adult role model.

Harriet Tubman Residential Center, Auburn, New York—serves as an intermediate step between secure care and group home living for girls ages 15-18 who are considered minors or first time offenders. The program's goal is to enable delinquent girls to return home as productive members of society.

Guiding Principles for Promising Female Programming: An Inventory of Best Practices, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998

