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Trauma among Girls in the Juvenile Justice System

From the

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Juvenile Justice Consortium

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Introduction

With rates of arrests for girls in the United States fast outpacing those for boys, the past decade has seen increasing attention devoted to understanding the causes, consequences, and solutions for girls' delinquency. Girls now account for approximately 30 percent of the estimated 2.11 million juvenile arrests made each year, and on any given day more than 7,800 girls reside in detention or juvenile corrections facilities in the US (Puzzanchera & Adams, 2011). Notably, it is among violent offenses that the greatest increases in arrest rates for girls are seen. For example, between 1980 and 2005, rates of arrest for violent offenses—including physical assault, sexual assault, and homicide--increased 78 percent for girls while declining 6 percent for boys (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006). Research also is emerging to suggest that girls in the justice system evidence higher levels of exposure to trauma and victimization (Ford, Grasso, Hawke, & Chapman, 2013; Kerig & Becker, 2012) and demonstrate significantly higher levels of mental health problems, including PTSD, in comparison to their male peers (Marston, Russell, Obsuth, & Watson, 2012). In sum, the growing number of girls in the justice system— and the adverse impact that traumatic stress and related mental health problems has on these girls—pose special challenges and responsibilities for juvenile justice prevention and intervention programs.

Why are There Increasing Numbers of Girls in the Juvenile Justice System?

Careful analyses of data on girls' arrests suggest that the recent increase is not a function of "girls gone wild" but rather results from changes in mandatory sentencing and law enforcement policies. Termed "net-widening" or "up-criming," these policies have increased the penalties for low-level infractions, particularly those involving substance use and domestic violence, which previously would have resulted in youth being referred to diversion or treatment programs rather than to the courts (Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2012). For example, a review of arrest reports involving almost 1,000 girls in California found that the majority of charges against girls for domestic assault resulted from "non-serious mutually combative situations with parents" (Acoca, 1999, p. 8), such as one girl who hit her father when he attempted to wrest the phone away from her as she called the police for help during a domestic dispute, and another girl whose offense involved "throwing cookies" at her mother. As these reports suggest, justice-involved girls are even more likely than boys to come from highly discordant homes in which they are both victims of and participants in family conflict; in fact, arrests for assault of a parent or other adult caregiver are over twice as frequent among girls than boys (Zahn et al., 2008; Chesney-Lind & Belknap, 2004). Girls' exposure to violent trauma and subsequent traumatic stress reactions may play a role in many of these "assaults," because they often take place in the context of ongoing family violence; nevertheless it is the girl herself who becomes involved in the legal system.

Of concern as well is that girls appear to receive harsher treatment from the juvenile justice system than boys when they do engage in misbehavior, with girls being almost twice as likely as boys to be

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detained for status and "technical" offenses (i.e., violating probation) and to receive more severe punishments than boys for those charges (Watson & Edelman, 2012). As noted above, in a kind of "double jeopardy", girls' involvement in the justice system may be directly driven by their experiences of victimization. For example, girls are disproportionately more likely than boys to be arrested for "survival crimes" (e.g., running away, shoplifting, involvement in commercial sexual exploitation) that often are associated with attempts to escape a maltreating home environment, just as girls are more likely than boys to be charged for "acting-out behaviors" (e.g., aggression, truancy, drug use) that often follow from abuse and victimization (Kerig & Schindler, 2013). In a vicious cycle, involvement in all of these delinquent activities is, in turn, related to a higher likelihood of revictimization for girls, particularly by increasing their risks of sexual assault and exposure to violence.

Prevalence of Trauma Exposure Among Justice-Involved Girls

A widely replicated finding is that youth in the juvenile justice system have been exposed to significantly higher rates of traumatic events than community youth (Wood et al., 2002), with rates of trauma exposure generally ranging from to 70 to 96 percent (Abram et al., 2002; see Kerig & Becker, 2012). In addition, although the prevalence rates differ across studies, the weight of the evidence suggests that many girls in the justice system have experienced even higher rates of victimization than their male peers, particularly those forms of abuse that occur in the context of close personal relationships such as family violence and sexual assault:

- Using data from the NCTSN Core Data Set, Dierkhising and colleagues (2013) found that, among the 658 youth who became involved in the juvenile justice system, the overall high rates of exposure to trauma were further differentiated by gender for two categories: girls were twice as likely as boys to report sexual abuse (31.8 percent versus 15.5 percent) and girls were four times more likely than boys to have experienced sexual assault (38.7 percent versus 8.8 percent)

- In a sample of girls court-mandated to out of home placements, 76 percent reported having experienced sexual abuse and 93 percent had documented histories of physical or sexual abuse (Smith et al., 2006)

- Among over 300 youth in a detention facility, Martin and colleagues (2008) found that significantly more girls than boys reported physical abuse (45 percent versus 15 percent, respectively) and sexual abuse (27 percent versus 6 percent, respectively)

- In a sample of over 1,300 detained youth, Kerig and colleagues (2012) found that, whereas boys were more likely than girls to have experienced violence in the community, girls were significantly more likely than boys to report having been the victims of family violence (37.8 percent versus 14.9 percent) as well as sexual abuse (35.1 percent versus 6.7 percent)

- In a sample of 264 youth in detention facilities, Ford and colleagues (2008) found that girls and boys were equally likely to have experienced a range of interpersonal and also non-interpersonal (e.g., life threatening accidents, severe injuries) traumatic stressors -- except girls were 8 times more likely than boys to report past sexual abuse and 2.5 times more likely to report past severe neglect.

- In one of the few studies to compare detained and community youth, Wood and colleagues (2002) found that, among justice-involved youth, girls were almost 10 times more likely than boys to report having been raped or molested (29 percent versus 3 percent); in addition, these

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experiences were three times more prevalent among justice-involved girls than a matched sample of high school girls.

Beyond the specific types of potentially traumatic experiences to which youths may be exposed, there appears to be a sub-group of children and adolescents who have been subjected to multiple types of victimization, which Finkelhor and colleagues term "polyvictimization" (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, & Holt, 2009). In a nationally representative sample of children and adolescents, Finkelhor and colleagues (2009) found that, while exposure to community violence best described the pathway to poly-victimization for boys, poly-victimized girls were more likely than their male counterparts to face the adversity of living in families that were characterized by high levels of violence, conflict, and behavioral health problems. Dangerous and troubled families thus may place girls at particular risk for both pervasive traumatic victimization and for involvement in the juvenile justice system.

- In a nationally representative sample of over 3,000 youth assessed via a telephone-administered structured interview, Ford and colleagues (2010) found that girls were more likely than boys to be poly-victims, and that polyvictimization was predictive of delinquency (as well as depression and PTSD).
- In a sample of almost 2000 youth in juvenile detention, Ford and colleagues (2013) also found that justice-involved girls were significantly over-represented amongst the poly-victims in their sample and girls were under-represented in the sub-group who had experienced few or no trauma exposures.

Prevalence of PTSD Among Justice-Involved Girls

Estimates of the prevalence of PTSD among girls vary widely depending on the kind of assessment performed (e.g., clinical interview vs. self-report), the source of information (e.g., youth vs. caregiver), the definition of PTSD used (e.g., full vs. partial; current vs. lifetime), and the samples drawn (e.g., serious offenders in long-term detention vs. community youth engaged in delinquent behaviors). Studies of community samples indicate that PTSD is 3 times more prevalent among girls than boys (e.g., 7.3% versus 2.2%; McLaughlin et al., 2013) and, consistent with these gender differences in the prevalence of PTSD in general, the weight of the evidence suggests that justice-involved girls are more likely than boys to meet criteria for a PTSD diagnosis and that girls display more severe PTSD symptoms than their male peers (Kerig & Becker, 2012):

- Although the overall rates may differ, many studies of PTSD among detained youth are consistent in showing a higher ratio of girls to boys, with between 25-50 percent of girls meeting criteria for a current diagnosis of PTSD, in comparison to 15-30 percent of boys (Cauffman et al., 1998; Kerig et al., 2009, 2011; Martin et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2002).

- Although girls were not more likely than boys to meet formal criteria for a PTSD diagnosis in Ford and colleague's (2008) detained sample, girls endorsed higher levels of posttraumatic symptoms (as well as problems with alcohol use) and almost twice as many girls than boys reported elevated levels of PTSD symptoms.

- Among justice-involved youth in the NCTSN Core Data set, girls reported significantly higher rates of PTSD symptoms than boys overall, and girls also endorsed more symptoms of reexperiencing specifically (Dierkhising et al., 2013). Similarly, in the Kerig et al. (2012) Utah sample, girls were twice as likely as boys to meet full criteria for a PTSD diagnosis (27.6 percent versus 13.6 percent) and to meet criteria for the reexperiencing cluster (45.9 percent versus 29.2 percent).

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Potential Consequences of Trauma for Girls

Studies consistently find that, among those who are exposed to trauma, girls and women are more likely than boys and men to develop PTSD as a result (Nooner et al., 2012). In addition, traumatized girls are more likely than their male peers to evidence co-morbid disorders, particularly depression, and trauma exposure is differentially associated with a host of other negative psychological and physical outcomes for girls, including substance abuse, self-harm, and participation in risky sexual behaviors. Moreover, longitudinal research on the developmental psychopathology of delinquency indicates that maltreatment, victimization, and trauma are strong predictors of justice-involvement especially for girls (see Kerig & Becker, 2014). Trauma disrupts a number of emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal processes that are important for adolescent development, particularly capacities for affective- and self-regulation, interpersonal trust, and effective problem-solving (Ford, 2009; Ford et al., 2006; Kerig & Becker, 2010). Thus, trauma increases the likelihood that girls will resort to unhealthy strategies for resolving conflicts (i.e., physical and relational aggression) and regulating emotions (i.e., drug and alcohol use), all of which may increase the risk of—or directly lead to—their involvement in the juvenile justice system.

The negative effects of trauma on girls' capacities to engage in positive interpersonal relationships are particularly noteworthy. As Chamberlain and Moore (2002) suggest, among traumatized girls, heightened stress-reactivity, developmental lags, and other impairments resulting from maltreatment increase the risk for "intra- and inter-relational chaos," which can in turn result in involvement in ongoing interpersonal conflicts. Exposure to trauma also increases the likelihood of girls' involvement with antisocial romantic partners, which increases the risk not only of justice-involvement but of subsequent intimate partner violence and re-victimization (Kerig, 2014).

Impact of Justice-System Involvement on Traumatized Girls

Interviews with stakeholders in the justice system, including staff, parents, and girls themselves, confirm that many characteristics of juvenile court and detention environments can be experienced as re-traumatizing (Ravoira et al., 2012). These include overtly physically intrusive and threatening detention procedures, such as being handcuffed, restrained, or strip-searched; witnessing violence among peers in the facility; or observing take-downs and other kinds of restrictive procedures being implemented against other youth by staff (Ford & Blaustein, 2013). In addition, traumatized girls also may be highly reactive to more subtle trauma reminders, such as gruffness from staff, isolation, and a lack of privacy and control over their bodies. Girls whose posttraumatic reactions are triggered may act out their distress in ways that appear disorganized, disobedient, or out of control, and thus bring further sanctions down upon them. In these ways, involvement in the juvenile justice system and "get tough" policies to redress delinquency may have adverse rather than ameliorative effects on girls (Griffin, 2002). The creation of a trauma-informed juvenile justice system in which staff are trained to recognize trauma triggers and are prepared to respond to traumatized youth is an important step forward (Marrow et al., 2012).

Gender-Responsive Programming

Recognition of the distinct pathways girls take toward delinquency has led to a call for gender-responsive intervention and prevention efforts that are directly concerned with the role of trauma in justice-involved girls' lives (National Girls Institute, 2013; Zahn et al., 2010). Models for gender-responsive programming propose that interventions for girls should be *holistic*, targeting girls' needs in multiple areas of life; *safe*, through building trust and using trauma-informed principles;

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strength-based, encouraging the development of confidence and competencies, *relational*, recognizing the ways that female development hinges on positive relationships; and *culturally responsive* by addressing girls' needs and risks in the context of diversity related to culture, race, ethnicity, religion, class, and sexual orientation (Walker, Muno and Sullivan-Colglazier, 2012). In addition, unique concerns related to girls' sexual health—including the needs of girls who are pregnant or are already mothers—require special attention and accommodations (Watson & Edelman, 2012).

Attempts to operationalize these goals have taken two tacks. One strategy has been to develop new gender-specific interventions specifically for justice-involved girls. Evidence confirming the effectiveness of gender-responsive programming for detained girls has recently emerged (Day, Zahn, & Tichavsky, 2014); however support for gender-responsive community programs for justice-involved girls is so far limited and mixed (Bell et al., 2012; Zahn et al., 2009). An alternative strategy has been to develop gender-responsive accommodations to existing evidenced-based treatments that are informed by an understanding of how trauma, victimization, and impaired relationships impact girls' development. For example, Pepler and colleagues (2004) revised their aggression prevention program to better meet the needs of young girls by adding a mother-daughter relationship component. Similarly, Chamberlain and colleagues (2002) added gender-responsive elements to Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) by preparing foster mothers to respond effectively to the volatility of traumatized girls' ways of relating with female caregivers; in turn, MTFC therapists help girls to better cope with relational aggression among their peers and to forge healthy sexual relationships with romantic partners. Most recently, MTFC for girls has been further enhanced by the incorporation of Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral therapy to directly address girls' trauma (Smith et al., 2012). The importance of using both trauma-focused and relational-focused interventions with girls involved in delinquency was highlighted by a randomized controlled therapy outcome study in which Ford and colleagues (2012) found that the trauma-focused therapy was most effective in achieving improvements in PTSD and anxiety symptoms, trauma-related beliefs, and emotion regulation, but a client-centered relational therapy was most effective in enabling girls to reduce anger problems and increase their sense of hope.

Summary

This review suggests that trauma-informed and gender-responsive programming and intervention models are needed in order to address girls' needs and to prevent retraumatization of girls in the juvenile justice system. Experiences of trauma, maltreatment, and victimization play a role in placing many girls on the pathway toward delinquency. Further, girls who participate in delinquent activities are at risk for re-traumatization and the additional long-term consequences associated with polyvictimization. Tellingly, it is in the context of their closest personal relationships that many girls in the justice system have endured their most hurtful experiences and it is also in the context of those relationships that they are most likely to perpetrate violence themselves. Given the importance of relational ties for girls' development, the fostering of positive relationships—with family members, peers, romantic partners, therapists, and juvenile justice professionals—has the capacity to play a significant role in helping girls to heal from trauma and desist from a delinquent course.

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