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A Review of Findings from the “Gender and Aggression Project” Informing Juvenile Justice Policy and Practice Through Gender-Sensitive Research

Candice L. Odgers, Marlene M. Moretti, & N. Dickon Reppucci

Adolescent girls comprise nearly a third of juvenile arrests, and rates of incarceration among young females have been rising rapidly. Yet, young women continue to be a neglected population in juvenile justice research and service delivery. This special issue is devoted to describing the critical issues that arise when young women come into contact with the juvenile justice system. Over the last decade, our research team has been working together to better understand the lives of justice-involved youth. To this end, we have conducted a multisite longitudinal study that has followed adolescents as they have moved through the juvenile justice system, with our most recent wave of assessments occurring as these young people made the transition back into their communities and into young adulthood. This special issue represents a collection of key findings from the Gender and Aggression Project, with a special emphasis on pathways that young women follow both into and out of the juvenile justice system.

The Gender and Aggression Project (GAP) involved a partnership of researchers from across diverse disciplines who came together to build a common research instrument that could be used within both normative and high-risk populations. The findings reviewed in this special issue are derived from two longitudinal studies that used this common assessment instrument to assess the profiles, risk factors, and outcomes of justice-involved youth in the United States and Canada. Study One, the *Gender and Aggression Project—Virginia Site*, recruited an entire population of females sentenced to secure custody during a 14-month period in a large southeastern state (93% of all admissions). Participants included 141 adolescent females who were, on average, 16 to 17 years of age at the time of the first assessment. The sample was racially/ethnically diverse, with 50.0% self-identifying as African-American, 2.2% as Native American, 1.4% as Hispanic and 8.0% as “Other”: the remaining 38.4% identified as Caucasian. Following their sentencing, each participant underwent a 30-day assessment, which included psychological and educational testing, in addition to a full medical examination completed by a physician. Each participant also completed approximately 6-8 hours of individual assessments, including semi-structured clinical interviews, computerized diagnostic assessments, and a self-report protocol. Approximately two

years after the initial interview, 78.5% (N=102) of eligible study members who had been released into the community for at least six months completed a 2-3 hour in-person assessment focused on reentry into the community and on mental and physical health functioning. The third wave of in-person assessments has just been completed with 120 of the study members being followed into young adulthood. To our knowledge, this is one of the largest in-depth studies of girls who have reached the deep-end of the juvenile justice system for which there is now longitudinal assessments available.

Study Two, the *Gender and Aggression Project—Vancouver Site* followed similar procedures to those outlined above but also included a matched sample of male adolescents and was based in British Columbia, Canada. Participants included 142 adolescents (76 males, 66 females) between the ages of 12 and 18 drawn from custody centers (61%), provincial assessment centers (36%), and probation offices (2%) around British Columbia’s lower mainland. Every new female admission to the custody and assessment centers was approached to participate in the study, and a comparable male sample was secured by matching participants on age. At the time that the analyses for the current study were completed, the sample consisted of slightly unequal numbers of males and females as the data collection and matching was still ongoing. The final sample consisted of adolescents who were actively involved in the criminal justice system and/or who had been diagnosed as having severe conduct disorder and behavioral problems.

Youth completed individual assessments comprised of semi-structured clinical interviews, computerized diagnostic assessments, and a battery of self-report measures. Collateral sources of information, including developmental and social histories, pre-sentencing and disposition reports, and psychological assessments, were coded as well. Similar to the procedures outlined in Study One, participants were followed up and assessed at two time points as they made the transition into young adulthood.

OVERVIEW OF KEY ISSUES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Throughout this special issue on females and the juvenile justice system, investigators from the Gender and Aggression Study share key findings from both the GAP-Virginia and GAP-Vancouver research sites. In the first article, Chauhan and col-

leagues ask whether neighborhood conditions and exposure to violence may help to explain the disproportionate arrest and incarceration of black female adolescents in the United States. Their findings challenge us to look beyond individual-level risk factors, such as age and family structure, and start to consider community-based interventions aimed at reducing crime—particularly violent crime—among youth. This study was one of the first to connect neighborhood factors to serious and violent offending among girls and raises important questions regarding systemic racism in the juvenile justice system and the (over) policing of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The next set of papers describes the mental and physical health profiles of justice-involved girls. Within this series, Russell and Marston build a convincing case that young women are the most psychiatrically impaired population in correctional settings today. The authors document the high rates of mental disorders such as attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, major depression and anxiety among this population and highlight the increased risk for reoffending and self-harm among these vulnerable youth as they make the transition back into their communities. The authors conclude with the powerful message that girls in the system represent not only a juvenile justice population, but that they comprise a substantial and largely untreated mental health population as well. To better respond to the needs of these young women, the authors summarize recommendations for screening, assessment, treatment, and aftercare with this population.

In the second article focused on mental health, Obsuth and Moretti review the high rates of substance use disorders and co-occurring mental health problems among this population. The authors draw attention to the role that early exposure to drugs and alcohol may play in placing adolescents on a negative life trajectory and outline how substance use disorders can promote criminal behavior and increase the risk for a wide range of poor outcomes. Their review indicates that justice-involved youth may be particularly vulnerable to the long-term effects of substance use and demonstrates the need for targeted interventions with this population, ideally beginning in early adolescence when many of these young people are first experimenting with drugs and alcohol.

Finally, Robins, Odgers, and Russell present new research profiling the physical health and medical problems experienced by girls in the justice system. While the state is under a moral and legal obligation to meet the physical health needs of juveniles in their care, recent legal challenges by the American Civil Liberties Union and others illustrate that the juvenile justice system is often falling short of these obligations. The authors document the wide range of health problems experienced by incarcerated girls—including high rates of injury risk, suicide attempts, HIV risk behaviors, obesity, and asthma. By tracking the physical health of girls over time, the authors illustrate that the health risks and medical problems among these young women persist as they make the transition into young adulthood and back into their communities. Despite the fact that this should be one of the healthiest periods of their lives, incarcerated girls are presenting extremely high rates of illness, injury, and disease risk. Recommendations for improved screening and medical treatment are provided.

The next set of papers focus on the role that aggression and violence play in the lives of these young women, and raise the important question of whether our traditional models and predictors of violence also “work” for girls. To this end, Penney and Lee review findings from the Gender and Aggression Project related to the prediction of aggression and violence among girls. Their review highlights important questions for juvenile justice decision makers to examine when considering risk for future violence among adolescents. Recently, a number of tools designed to predict future violence among (primarily male) adults have been extended downward to populations of adolescents. One of the most prominent instruments, the Psychopathy Checklist—Youth Version (PCL-YV), has garnered significant attention as well as a great deal of controversy regarding its use. Unfortunately, while this class of instruments has been shown to predict violence among adults, very few studies have been conducted with adolescents. As Lee and Penny detail, this instrument has been recommended for use with girls. However, there is no evidence to support its use with this population, and research from our team suggests that psychopathy, as measured by the PCL-YV, does not actually predict future offending or violence among girls. Instead, the authors argue that it may be more productive to consider gender-specific domains of risk—such as victimization experiences and relationship contexts—when trying to understand why rates of violence among girls are on the rise. Their summary suggests new ways forward in trying to understand “hot” and “interpersonal” acts of aggression among girls, while urging caution before applying models of violence and tools that have been validated only on male populations.

In an effort to understand how the types of early victimization experiences that Lee and Penny identified as being important for girls may translate into future violence and aggression Bartolo, Peled, and Moretti focus on two types of social-cognitive processes—rejection sensitivity and anger rumination. Throughout their review, the authors explore how a more nuanced understanding of these processes could assist sentencing and rehabilitation decisions. The authors also review findings from the Gender and Aggression Project suggesting that girls may be particularly sensitive to interpersonal threats and, in part due to their early childhood experiences of abuse, may be more likely to react strongly and aggressively in situations where they perceive that they are being rejected by others. They conclude that many of these young women may have a diminished capacity for controlling their behavior within interpersonal situations and, as such, advocate for a careful consideration of the relationship contexts in which they are embedded.

Following up on the importance of interpersonal relationships in the lives of these young women, Oudekerk and Reppucci provide a window into the role that romantic relationships may play in promoting criminal involvement among girls in the justice system. The authors review research illustrating that both males and females involved in antisocial behavior engage in assortative mating—that is, they are more likely to partner with antisocial individuals. While partner selection does not appear to have an effect on the criminal involvement of males, girls with antisocial partners tend to engage in more criminal behavior and are more likely to per-

sist in a criminal lifestyle as they age. Interestingly, finding a positive romantic partner tends to reduce the risk for future offending among girls and may be a protective factor—or a pathway out of criminal justice involvement. Their findings from the Gender and Aggression Project reinforce the message that assortative mating may have adverse consequences for young women and illustrate that girls with antisocial partners are close to 11 times more likely to engage in violence! Their chapter illustrates the extreme rates of physical violence in the relationships of girls involved in serious offending and point to both early victimization experiences and partner age differences as important factors in helping to explain the young adult outcomes of these young women.

The final paper in this special issue presents a way forward with respect to interventions and policy recommendations for justice-involved adolescents. In this article, Moretti and colleagues summarize key factors that should be considered when designing and delivering interventions to justice-involved girls. The authors emphasize the importance of early intervention and prevention efforts, but also highlight effective and promising programs—such as CONNECT—that are being delivered following detection by the juvenile justice system. The review of intervention and prevention programs that have been shown to work with high-risk populations, both during early childhood and adolescence, allows us to conclude this issue on a positive note. That is, although resources for program delivery with this population are often limited, interventions and services that have proven efficacy do exist and, if properly implemented, have the potential to greatly improve the lives of justice-involved youth.

Together this collection of articles outlines key issues facing justice-involved female adolescents and aims to translate findings from our research team to inform policy and treatment within juvenile justice contexts. In many ways, we are just beginning to understand the complicated and often violence-ridden pathways that these young women are following as they make their way through the juvenile justice system. The hope is that research findings from our team and others can be used to help tailor juvenile justice policy and develop interventions that are sensitive to the unique risk profiles, offending behaviors, and treatment needs of these young women.



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N. Dickon Reppucci, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia. He has been Director of its Community Psychology program, with its emphasis on law and children and diversity, since 1976, and been the mentor to more than 50 Ph.D. students. He has received the Distinguished Contributions in Research Award from the Society for Community Research and Action (1998) and the American Psychology/Law Society Mentoring Award (2007). He is author or co-author of four books, including THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN (1988) with Jeffrey Haugaard and PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT THROUGH PARENT EDUCATION (1997) with Preston A. Britner and Jennifer L. Woolard, and more than 150 articles and chapters, including the 2008 co-recipient of the Society for Research on Adolescence Social Policy Award for Best Article—Testimony and Interrogation of Minors: Assumptions of Immaturity and Immorality published in the American Psychologist. His major areas of research are juvenile competence, juvenile justice, and child abuse. He is currently investigating police perceptions of juvenile interrogations and aggressive, violent female juvenile offenders.