

GIRLS, GANGS AND CRIME: PROFILE OF THE YOUNG FEMALE OFFENDER [5233]

Lianne Archer, New Rochelle City School District, New Rochelle, New York
Andrew M. Grascia, Westchester County Office of the District Attorney, White Plains, New York

Abstract

The latest research on female gangs and female arrest statistics indicates a rise not only in violent offenses, but also in the willingness of law enforcement to view women as violent offenders. This shift in attitude by law enforcement within the last decade is an awakening long overdue. Ironically, it may be through this willingness to view the female as a dangerous entity in and of herself that the juvenile female offender may finally begin to receive the help she so desperately needs. In exploring why more females are being arrested on weapons charges, why there are increases in the percentages of female arrests, and why females are gaining more influence in the gang world, the underlying question remains: from where does this recent impetus for violence stem? This paper look at the recent statistics on female arrests and offers some possible and compelling reasons behind them.

Introduction

Females have traditionally been viewed by law enforcement as "accessories," "appendages," "mirrors," or "satellites" to male gang activity, and in many jurisdictions, they are not even counted as gang members (Curry and Decker, 1998). This reluctance has been explained by the tendency of some jurisdictions to qualify an offense as being "gang related" only if the offense was committed by an actual gang member (Moore and Hagedorn, 2001). Behind this distinction is the bias that violence is not naturally feminine.

The fascination with a "new" violent female offender is not really new. In the 1970s, a notion emerged that the women's movement "caused" a surge in women's serious crimes, but this discussion focused primarily on an imagined increase in crimes of adult females, usually white females. More recently, however, the discussion has turned to the young females' commission of violent crimes, often in association with youth gangs.

Females have not been thought capable of committing "male crimes" for reasons that often arise from law enforcement and society falsely accepting gender stereotypes as valid: viewing the female as the weaker and gentler gender; believing that females, no matter how ill-treated, are incapable of violence. This underestimation of the anger and devastation resulting from physical, emotional, and psychological violation affects the lack of services for females in need or at-risk, thus costing all of us valuable time in meeting the needs of young girls, saving their lives, and thwarting the surge of violence by female gangs that has now become a focus for law enforcement, legislators, and gang researchers alike. Understanding the potential of young females for violence means understanding the catalysts that drive these adolescent girls to become violent offenders.

Is the Female Juvenile a Victim First?

In 2000, the highest percentage of juvenile female arrests occurred between the ages of 13 and 15 (Snyder, 2002). It is hard to imagine that young girls at such an impressionable age would be placing themselves in situations that lead to arrests. The truth is, young girls are running from a cold and harsh reality. They come from abusive and negligent homes, have nowhere to turn, and for many, have few options. A 1998 National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) study of girls in the California juvenile justice system revealed that 92 percent of the interviewed juvenile female offenders had been the victims of "some form of emotional,

physical, and/or sexual abuse" (Acoca, 1999; Acoca and Dedel, 1998). These girls were reported to have been "beaten, stabbed, shot, or raped" at 13 and 14 years old, with a median age of 13 for sexual assault/activity and of age 14 for when they became victims of a shooting or stabbing and/or delivered their first child (Acoca, 1999; Acoca and Dedel, 1998). In a special report by the Office of Justice Programs entitled *Women in Criminal Justice: A Twenty Year Update*, national statistics further support the above findings by showing that one in four girls under the age of 18 has been sexually abused (1998).

These traumatic experiences are viewed by academics and practitioners as the reason for clear correlations between victimization and serious drug abuse (Acoca, 1999; Acoca and Dedel, 1998). Because mood-altering drugs aid in dulling the pain of traumatic experiences, it is believed to be the combination of trauma and drug influence that places these young girls in the uncomfortable position of engaging in high-risk behaviors (e.g., unsafe sexual practices and gang involvement) (Acoca, 1999; Acoca and Dedel 1998). Chesney-Lind, Sheldon, and Joe have noted that female juveniles represent an estimated 6 percent of gang members (1996); recent statistics and research indicate that this number is climbing even higher.

Why Do Young Females Join Gangs?

According to Hirschi (1969), who studied delinquent behavior and the social bonds that control delinquency, those with close bonds to social groups and institutions (e.g., family and school) are the least likely to become delinquent. Four major elements constitute the social bond: (a) *attachment*, which refers to one's connection (mostly of an emotional kind) to groups, family, peers, school, etc.; (b) *commitment*, which is the "investment" one makes in conventional society; (c) *involvement*, seen as one's participation in traditional activities, such as going to school, working, and participating in sports; and (d) *belief*, which refers to an acceptance of basic moral values and laws. Hirschi's research found that youths who had the strongest attachments were the most *committed*, had the strongest *belief* in conventional moral values and the law, and were the least *delinquent*.

Female delinquency in the early part of the 1990s reflected a curious resurgence of interest by girls engaging in nontraditional masculine behavior—notably, joining gangs, carrying guns, and fighting with other girls (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, pg. 31). Peer relationships, in fact, appear to be one of the most significant determinants of female gang membership. Joining a gang may be a conscious and deliberate decision that often involves considering several alternatives: losing friends vs. keeping them or belonging to a group vs. being an outsider. To some degree, gangs may serve an adaptive function by providing the basic means of survival in a threatening environment. Young females may become involved in gangs because of past experiences of victimization or the fear that they may be victimized in the future. Ironically, some young females may find that the only way to protect themselves from gangs in their neighborhoods is to become affiliated with gangs. Still others become gang members through relationships with male gang members, or being "beat in," "sexed in," or "born in." Frequently, young females have been arrested for carrying weapons for their "boyfriends," providing them alibis, and even holding, transporting, or distributing narcotics for them.

In a number of studies, it appears that family relationships play a relatively modest role as a motivator for female gang involvement. Instead, affective characteristics (such as low self-esteem or poor interpersonal relationships) may have a larger influence on a young female's decision to join a gang than father absence, family poverty, or parental control. For some young females, gang involvement may draw the attention, albeit negative, of emotionally distant parents, while for others, gangs may provide refuge from unsatisfactory home environments or the opportunity to act out violent behavior patterns learned within the home. Others view gang membership as a way to get respect.

Despite the inherent difficulties of tracking this growing phenomenon of females in gangs, books are

nonetheless being written on the subject. In *Locas*, Yxta Maya Murray (1998) talks with two females who are surrounded by gang culture. Although they are not members of a gang, it becomes apparent that these females are involved in the gang world and are seen throughout the book assisting the gang and its members in committing various crimes. In *8 Ball Chicks*, Gini Sikes (1998) writes about females in gangs and in the criminal lifestyles they lead. Sikes's book introduces readers to female gang members growing up "in the hood," gang members who have killed, and gang members who explain not only why they joined a gang but, chillingly, why they would die for it.

In June 2001, ABC Eyewitness News 11, reported that while gang membership was down nationally in the United States, the Justice Department was alarmed about a growing problem: *female gang membership*. ABC News maintained that girls are "catching up with boys in this one area," "joining gangs for the same reasons as the boys," and involved in the same activities as boys: selling drugs and committing murder. The same story that opened with a proclamation of how overall gang membership was on the decline—as low as 20 percent in some areas—closed with a fear that the drug-selling, violent gang member—*female gang member*—is "everywhere" (Gibbs, 2001).

On February 23, 1992, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a story subtitled "Troubled Girls, Troubling Violence" that asserted the following:

Girls are committing more violent crimes than ever before. Girls used to get in trouble like this mostly as accomplices of boys, but that's no longer true. They don't need the boys. And their attitudes toward their crimes are often as hard as the weapons they wield—as shown in this account based on documents and interviews with participants, parents, police, and school officials. While boys still account for the vast majority of juvenile crime, girls are starting to catch up. (Santiago, 1992, p. A1)

Lastly, NBC News broadcast a story on its nightly news that with an eye-opening observation:

Gone are the days when girls were strictly sidekicks for male gang members, around merely to provide sex and money and run guns and drugs. Now girls also do shooting . . . the new members, often as young as twelve, are the most violent Ironic as it is, just as women are becoming more powerful in business and government, the same thing is happening in gangs. (NBC, 1993)

These stories are only a few examples of the many media accounts that have appeared since the "liberation hypothesis" that linked female (social) "equality" to young females' participation in gangs.

The Female Path to Juvenile Injustice

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999, Women Offenders:

- Fifty seven of females under correctional authority report that they were physically or sexually assaulted at some time in their lives.
- Sixty-nine percent reported that the assaults happened prior to age 18.
- Thirty-two percent reported that they were abused by a family member, relative or intimate acquaintance.
- Twenty percent of female offenders have spent time in the foster care system.
- Fifty-eight percent grew up in homes without both parents present.
- Thirty-four percent grew up in homes where the parents abused alcohol and/or drugs.

Recent national data show that girls are more likely than boys to be referred to the court system by sources

other than law enforcement agencies (i.e., parents, school, etc.), for behaviors, such as running away, truancy, and incorrigibility. Similarly, it is the status offenses, as opposed to the actual crimes, which usually bring young females into the juvenile justice system. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the young female offender currently represents the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice system with 645,000 arrests of females under the age of 18 nationwide in 2001. (Juvenile Arrest Statistics, 2001)

Many girls who enter the juvenile justice system come from unstable home environments or a violent home life and enter the system as runaways trying to escape abuse. It is often this initial status offense that introduces them to the juvenile justice system (OJP, 1998). In 2000, the percentage of arrests for female runaways was at 59 percent, with 39 percent involving juveniles under age 15 (Snyder 2002). Exactly what percentage of these runaways suffered physical, sexual, or emotional abuse at home is unclear, but what is clear is that these girls, in their will to escape, are determined to survive. For some, the thought of being arrested and taken somewhere where they will be better cared for may be a welcoming one. In fact, the reality they face is a far harsher one.

Once in the juvenile justice system these girls continue to be subjected to abuse and/or humiliation. In fact, "abuse reportedly experienced by girls from the point of arrest through detention include the consistent use by staff of foul and demeaning language, inappropriate touching, pushing and hitting, isolation, deprivation of clean clothing . . . [and] strip searches . . . in the presence of male officers" (Acoca, 1999). These occurrences are common and routine and further reinforce the lasting impressions of abuse already endured by these young girls.

The Cyclical Nature of Abuse

It is common knowledge that adult abusers were often victims of childhood abuse themselves, but what Widom (1992) has documented in her at-risk prevention study as the ramifications of such abuse, is truly alarming. Widom finds that neglect and abuse *as a child* increases the likelihood of juvenile arrest by 53 percent, arrest as an adult by 38 percent, and the likelihood of committing a violent crime by 38 percent. If we as a society want to stop the violence by females, then we must realistically look toward preventing violence to the female.

According to an article in the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Bulletin entitled "Prisoners in 2002," the years 1995–2001 saw a rise in the population of violent offenders that accounted for 49 percent of female state prisoner growth. The article goes on to report that "The number of female prisoners increased 4.9 percent—double that of men, 2.4 percent—during 2002" (Harrison and Beck, 2003). Researchers Acoca and Austin interviewed women in prison to determine their common characteristics, and the Office of Justice Programs (OJP, 1998) interpreted their findings as follows:

- Seventy-two point two (72.2) percent of the women experienced one or more forms of emotional abuse;
- Sixty-seven point five (67.5) percent had experienced one or more forms of physical or sexual abuse as children;
- Thirty-one point one (31.1) percent of the women reported that they had been raped or sodomized as children, of which 11.3 percent had been victimized more than five times or repeatedly;
- Forty-five (45) percent reported having been beaten or physically abused in another way as children with 35.8 percent having experienced it more than five times.

These statistics further warrant the need to address the underlying issues of why and how the underlying raw emotions of young abused females erupt into violence.

What Factors Put These Girls at Risk?

Profile of the Young Female Offender:

- High rates of physical and sexual abuse
- Severe drug addiction
- Low academic and employment achievement
- Chronically dysfunctional and abusive families

All of these factors cause severe trauma and dramatic short- and long-term effects in victims, which manifests in behaviors such as fear, anxiety, depression, anger, hostility, and inappropriate sexual activity.

The lack of a stable home life or the presence of a violent one is a contributing factor in why young women become violent (Weiler, 1999). The case files of the girls involved in the above-mentioned NCCD study found that " . . . 95 percent of the girls were assessed as lacking a stable home environment, and 11 percent had experienced or witnessed the death of one or both parents or a sibling" (Acoca, 1999). Other factors mentioned throughout female gang literature include, but are not limited to poor academic performance, threat of victimization in neighborhoods, a need to belong, a desire for a sense of family, efforts to obtain what would otherwise be unobtainable, and a search for some sense of power and importance. In many ways, gangs promise the structure of a family, a well-defined role, and a purpose.

Clinical Impressions ¹

Lisa, 17, African-American, member of the "Crips" for past three years, "sexed in," born with positive toxicology to crack cocaine, raised in kinship foster care, and physically abused by various relatives before returning to her mother's care at age 13. Upon returning home to her mother, she felt that her mother had a "new life." Her mother has been in recovery for the past six years, had remarried, and had three other children. Lisa felt like "a stranger," that this was her mother's "new" family that she was not "part of." She chose to be "sexed in" because she did not want to be physically assaulted; she felt that the gang provided the sense of "family" that she so desperately wanted. Today, Lisa continues to struggle in her relationship with her mother, her mother feels a tremendous amount of guilt and shame about her past use of drugs, and both are working on improving communication.

Katie, 16, Italian/Puerto Rican descent, member of "South Side Locs" (SSL) for the past year, and "beat in." Her mother has four children, all with different fathers. She feels that her mother has "no time for me, because she is always chasing after some man." She joined a Mexican gang because the "Puerto Rican gangs don't like me, I don't know why," and reports that she had to "prove" herself worthy to join SSL, because she was not of Mexican descent. She is one of the few female members in her gang, and feels that her "set" is "more of a family than a gang."

Pia, 16, Mexican, and peripheral member of "Brown Raza", for past two years. Neither of Pia's parents speaks English, although they have been in this country for the past 14 years. Pia was engaging in at-risk behaviors such as truancy and running away and disclosed that she ran away because her parents were trying to move back to Mexico. The family was reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) due to educational neglect allegations; Pia did not attend her 10th grade year. Pia reported that it was because her parents were in Mexico and she was residing with her 27-year-old sister, who could not register her for school because she was not her legal guardian. Pia's father does not believe that women should be educated; rather they should

¹ Names have been changed in Clinical Impressions to protect the privacy and safety of the individuals.

be home “cleaning house and helping to raise the children.” Pia’s mother would not respond when questions were posed directly to her regarding Pia’s desire for education, only that she “agreed with whatever her husband says.” Pia’s boyfriend is a high-ranking member of “Brown Raza.” She alleges that they are a Sureño gang (Sur 13, X3, or XIII), and that is why they wear “blue flags.” She is desperately hoping that Brown Raza will merge with “La Raza,” a larger gang, because they allow females as full-fledged members. She believes that “Brown Raza” treats her as “one of the family.”

In the authors’ personal experiences with these young females, one theme remains constant in their entrance into the juvenile justice system: mother-daughter relational problems. Margaret Mahler based her observational studies of infant-mother relationships, and she developed a theory of object-relations development. Object-relations theory is an offshoot of psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes interpersonal relationships, primarily in the family, and especially between mother and child. This theory now forms the basis of much thinking about the way people develop their relationships with others. Object-relations theory is a useful tool in understanding the impact that maternal discord has on these young females. These brief case studies highlight this area of focus. Mahler placed great emphasis on the importance of “holding” a child; literal holding, which helps keep the child feel secure through physical holding, and psychological holding, which keeps tension and frustration from becoming too great. This “holding space” is where the child can be itself and feel protected and secure (Daniels, 2001). In the above examples, none of these young females experienced positive “holding spaces” from their biological mothers. As a result, they all sought out “holding spaces” from others, which led to their pathways into gang involvement.

Conclusions

There seems to be no concrete theory as to why these girls—and later, as women—find themselves in such trouble. Many cite early risk factors that include poverty, ill-health, early sexual activity, early pregnancy, parental negligence, the need for freedom, power, and a myriad of other possible explanations. What is currently known is that what keeps these girls “at-risk” is the lack of services, education, and programs that are gender-specific to the female. As long as the juvenile justice system, community-based programs, law enforcement, schools, and families continue to ignore the needs of the young female—and confine her to victimization—female violence will continue.

The juvenile arrest experience cannot remain one in which young girls, initially arrested for status offenses to escape the horrors of their home lives, find themselves asked to endure further betrayal, shame, anger, and isolation. Through their violence, these girls and women have given themselves a voice that society would not allow them to have and that it can no longer ignore. The treatment they have received as victims of abuse and neglect, both at home and within the justice system, may help explain what drives some of these girls to become repeat offenders and to continue using drugs and alcohol to numb their pain. They seek out the gang as a refuge: a place where they can belong, be protected, and most importantly, be seen fighting back—stronger, and as violently as they have been violated—letting themselves and the world know they will not be victims again. These girls are desperate and alone, and need to know now that we hear them.

In no way should the violent acts of these female offenders go unpunished, nor should they be excused. Rather, the intent of this paper is to provoke a discussion of how and why we have allowed ourselves as a society to ignore the blatant cries for help of the female juvenile offender, and to ask ourselves why we have excused and continue to excuse her victimization.

Addendum

“The Client vs. The Offender”

Society attributes characteristics to our professions: social workers are supportive, compassionate, and hard

working, but not very useful, and police officers are domineering and oppressive. However, for Andy and me, the reality of our jobs is based on the real life experience of working together, with a mutual understanding of and respect for the pressures faced by each other.

What are our roles? The fundamental nature of policing is to protect order in society and allow people to live without fear of crime. This enhances community safety and well-being. There is, more specifically, a responsibility to the most vulnerable in society and a duty to protect the weak from the criminal. Similarly, social workers are also motivated by a desire to make a difference for the better in people's lives—again, society's most vulnerable.

Inevitably, there is an overlap in our “client groups,” although we may approach them differently, with law enforcement seeing victims and/or offenders, where social workers see clients. Whatever view we have of these individuals, we recognize common threads that run through their lives and contribute to the nature of their contact with the police and/or social worker.

Still, there are some important areas of difference between our agencies and associated tensions, due perhaps to our statutory obligations and the different perspectives from which we approach our work within the criminal justice system.

These perceptions are inevitable, but, for us, significant progress has been made in recognizing the value of each profession and accepting that there are common aims and objectives. Increasingly, we are realizing that no single agency can solve problems, and that greater progress can be achieved more by working together.

References

- Acoca, L. (1999). Investing in girls: a 21st century strategy. *Juvenile Justice*, VI(1). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Acoca, L. and Dedel, K. (1998). No place to hide: Understanding and meeting the needs of girls in the California juvenile justice system. San Francisco, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency.
- Chesney-Lind, M. and Pasko, L. (2004). The female offender: girls, women, and crime. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Chesney-Lind, M., Sheldon, R. and Joe. K. (1996). Girls, delinquency, and gang membership. In *Gangs in America*, 2d ed., Edited by C.R. Huff. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Curry, D., and Decker, S. (1998). *Confronting gangs*. Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Daniels, V. (2001). Object relations theory. Retrieved January 7, 2004 from www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/objectrelations.html.
- Gibbs, B. (2001, June 19). Number of girls in gangs increasing. Retrieved on January 7, 2004 from http://abclocal.go.com/wtvd/features/061901_CF_girlsgangs.html [Ed. The page no longer is available at this URL.]
- Greenfield, L. and Snell, T. (1999, December). Women Offenders. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved January 7, 2004 from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/wo.pdf>
- Harrison, P. M., and Beck, A. J. (2003). Prisoners in 2002. NCJ 200248. Washington DC: Office of Justice Programs.
- Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kimes, K. (2003, May 16). “Girls in the gang, the girl behind the gangster now is behind the trigger.” Atlanta: *Creative Loafing*.
- Mendez, D. (1996). *Teenage girls in smaller cities becoming involved in gangs*. New York: Associated Press.
- Molidor, C. (1996). “Female gang members: a profile of aggression and victimization. *Social Work Journal*, 41(3), 251-257.
- Moore, J., and Hagedorn, J. (March 2001). Female gangs: a focus on research. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*.
- Murray, Y. M. (1998). *Locas*. New York: Grove Press
- National Youth Gang Center. (2000). 1998 National Youth Gang Survey. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- NBC (1993, March 29). *NBC nightly news*. [Television broadcast]. Diana Koricke in East Los Angeles.
- Santiago, D. (1992, February 23). Random victims of vengeance show teen crime: troubled girls, troubling violence.

Philadelphia Inquirer, p A1.

Sikes, G. (1998). *8 Ball Chicks*. New York: Anchor Books.

Snyder, H. N. (December 2003). Juvenile arrests 2001. *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*.

Walker-Barnes, C., Arrue, R. and Mason, C. (February 1998). Girls and gangs: identifying risk factors for female gang involvement. [Poster presented at the meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, San Diego, CA.

February 1998.]

Weiler, J. (2000). An overview of research on girls and violence. *Choice Briefs* (1). New York: Columbia University. Institute for Urban and Minority Education.

Widom, C. S. (1992). The cycle of violence. NCJ 136607. Washington DC: National Institute of Justice.

Women in criminal justice: A twenty-year update. (1998). [Monograph. Electronic edition] An update of the Report of the LEAA (Law Enforcement Assistance Administration) Task Force on Women, first published in October 1975.

Retrieved month, day, year, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/reports/98Guides/wcjs98/>

Female gangs: A focus on research.(March 2001). *Juvenile Justice Bulletin*.

Youth gangs in schools. (August 2000). *Institute for Intergovernmental Research Justice Bulletin*.