Identifying and addressing the developmental needs of girls in the juvenile justice system

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CJ and JJ systems built around behaviors and needs of boys

Compared to Girls:
- Boys offend more
- Boys engage in more violent offending
- Boys offend for different reasons

A system designed to address the behaviors and needs of boys is not likely well suited for addressing the behaviors and needs of girls.
To effectively deal with this population we need to understand the related:

- Incarceration trends
- Broad risks and needs
- Heterogeneity within this population
- Best practices for intervention and prevention
Female and male trends in juvenile offending
Source: OJJDP

Key take away—the gender gap is narrowing because arrests of boys is going down more quickly than arrests of girls.
These shifts affect all stages of the JJ System.

Source: Sherman and Balck 2015, "Gender Injustice"
Every day in the U.S., abused and traumatized girls enter and are pushed through the justice system. Despite decades of attention, the proportion of girls in the juvenile justice system has increased and their challenges have remained remarkably consistent, resulting in deeply rooted, systemic gender injustice. Even in the midst of the current “developmental era” of reform, juvenile justice systems are routinely failing to modify promising system reforms for girls or even to collect data on how girls are affected by the problems systems seek to remedy.

Despite overall declining juvenile arrest rates, in the last two decades, girls’ share of the juvenile justice system increased at all stages of the juvenile justice process:

The traumatic and unhealthy social environments in which many girls live result in behaviors that are criminalized or are mishandled by other systems, resulting in girls’ entry into the juvenile justice system. Once girls are there, misguided processes pull them deeper into a system that is not built to help, heal, or respond to girls’ developmental needs, and often actually worsens girls’ situations. This process is built on structural gender inequality and is particularly harsh on girls of color and LBQ/GNCT (lesbian, bisexual, questioning/gender non-conforming, transgender) girls.

Systems fail across the board to understand and address the needs of girls as part of juvenile justice reforms, but the needs of certain groups of girls warrant particular focus—pregnant and parenting girls, girls who run away, girls who are victims of sex trafficking, and the very many girls who are victims of in-home and community violence and abuse. For too many girls, adversity in their homes, communities, and in the way they experience society is traumatizing. This trauma, with its attendant psychological, emotional, and physical difficulties, long-term health complications, and adversity in adulthood, plays a particularly powerful role for girls and young women:

Yet for these girls and others, the current justice system responds to behaviors caused by trauma and abuse with punishment and fails to offer girls effective solutions and a healthy path forward.

Arrests increased 45 percent (from 20 to 29 percent);

Court caseload increased 40 percent (from 20 to 28 percent);

Detentions increased 40 percent (from 15 to 21 percent);

Post-adjudication probation increased 44 percent (from 16 to 23 percent); and

Post-adjudication placement increased 42 percent (from 12 to 17 percent).

Source: Sherman and Balck 2015, “Gender Injustice”
Recent interest in girls and young women as the fastest growing segment of the CJ system

This is primarily a reflection of systemic changes in juvenile justice

• “net-widening” policies:
  • Broadening def of violence
  • Policing the private sphere
  • Less tolerance toward juvenile females
  • Preventative punishment strategies
General overlap for males and females **BUT** important differences in both exposure and salience

Girls come from more dysfunctional family contexts and have more MH needs
Girls in the JJ system have moderately more exposure to every individual ACE and are significantly more likely to experience cumulative exposure to multiple ACEs (girls 45% at 5+; boys 24%)
The problem behavior of girls and young women, more so than boys, is linked to:

- **Disrupted Interpersonal Networks**
  - Family problems, peers influences and relationships

- **Trauma and Abuse**
  - Child abuse, exposure to DV, experiences of partner violence

- **Mental Health Needs**
  - Depression, anxiety

- **Turbulent developmental transitions**
  - Problems navigating the transition to adolescence or adulthood
What keep some girls out of trouble?

PROMOTIVE FACTORS

- At-risk girls who stay out of trouble tend to exhibit:
  
  - Healthy, supportive family and peer relationships
  
  - Empathy
  
  - Coping resources including self-worth
Chronic/Persistent

Adolescent or YA Onset

Low-rate

Female offenders are not a homogenous group
Girls’ Offending Pathways and Related Needs

- Chronic/Persistent Female Offenders
  - Early onset, multiple risk factors

- Importance of Early Intervention
  - Tertiary interventions should include treatment for mental health and substance problems, building emotional resilience and coping skills, relationship building
Girls’ common reactions to trauma are criminalized and exacerbated by involvement in the juvenile justice system, leading to a cycle of abuse and imprisonment.
Girls’ Offending Pathways and Related Needs

Adolescent Onset

- Early puberty and precocious sexuality, family and peer conflict, maturity gap and identity crisis
- Risks of getting ensnared—teen pregnancy, abusive relationships, educational disengagement, alcohol and drugs

These girls and their families need help managing the transition to adolescence:

- Peer pressure and conflict
- Developing autonomy and independence
- Shifting parent/child relationships
Young Adult Onset

- Difficulties managing the transition out of adolescence—expectations and demands of adulthood—ill-equipped to handle independence

- Need help building job and relationship skills

- Need to strengthen emotional management skills and coping resources
Promising Interventions

- A thorough review of current practices that funnel girls into the Juvenile Justice System
  - Examples:
    - Assess zero tolerance policies at schools—especially in relation to truancy and fighting
    - Evaluate policing/arrest/detention strategies for girls who are generally high-needs but low-risk
Promising Interventions

Core building blocks:

- Address the role of victimization in the lives of girls and young women in the system (or at risk of system involvement):
  - Early intervention for girls exposed to abuse and other forms of victimization
  - *Trauma informed* treatment for mental health and substance abuse problems
  - Relationship building skills including empathy
  - Promote self-worth and positive identities
Promising Interventions

Core building blocks:

- Promote/build healthy family relationships
- Provide consistent and continuous care outside the system—for both emotional and practical needs
- Use a range of strategies—cognitive, behavioral, affective and systemic
- Provide female role models and mentors of varying cultural backgrounds
Use these building blocks and gender sensitive assessment tools to create individualized treatment plans that detail appropriate interventions to match the identified needs/assets of each girl.

This requires effective and collaborative engagement across multiple systems.
Questions?

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