



Juvenile Justice Matters

Juvenile Justice Commission

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Young Women in New Jersey's Juvenile Justice System

Juvenile justice is a system traditionally geared to addressing the delinquency problem from a male perspective. Greater awareness of the shortcomings of this focus has come in response to the fact that females are accounting for a *growing share* of the delinquent population, particularly incarcerated youth. With this in mind, there is increasing acknowledgement of the importance of developing what has been termed gender responsive programming for females to address the often unique needs posed by females involved with, and at risk of involvement with, the juvenile justice system. The following provides a brief description of female involvement in the system, as well as a rationale for providing a more gender responsive approach.

Involvement in the Juvenile Justice System

Juvenile Arrests. In 2003, there were 16,074 juvenile arrests of females in New Jersey, comprising 26% of all juvenile arrests. Girls also accounted for 26% of Index offenses (i.e., murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, and auto theft), but a smaller portion (17%) of the violent Index offenses (i.e., murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault). They also accounted for 13% of drug arrests.

The most common "offense" for which girls are taken into custody is running away (technically a juvenile-family crisis

situation). This is the only arrest category for which they comprised a greater share than boys (58% of the total). The accompanying table lists the "top ten" offense types for which girls were arrested, along with the share they contributed to all arrests in each category.

While both male and female arrests declined substantially over a ten-year period (1994-2003) from their peak years, the female share of arrests has increased considerably over time. While females accounted for 26% of all arrests in 2003, that figure had been 22% in 1994 (and 19% back in 1984). While they accounted for 17% of all arrests for violent Index offenses in 2003, that figure had been 14% in 1994 (and only 10% in 1984).

Additional System Trends. In recent years, relative to boys, girls have accounted for a slightly greater portion of juveniles entering family court on new delinquency complaints, while comprising a greater share of detention admissions, as well as commitments and residential placements with the Juvenile Justice Commission. Specifically, between 1999 and 2003, the female share grew slightly from 26% to 27% of all juveniles entering court. Between 1994 through 2003, girls went from comprising 12% to 16% of all admissions to county juvenile detention facilities. During that period, their admissions grew 30%. Finally, the female share of all commitments to the JJC grew from 4% to 6% between 1999 and 2003; and the female share of all probationers placed residentially with the JJC grew from 4% to 9%. It is worth noting that over that five-year period, the number of female commitments grew 52% (up from 44 to 67).

Gender Specific Differences and Issues

The literature on youth development clearly shows that young women relate and think differently than young men. The differences appear to result from some combination of "nature and nurture," i.e., predisposition and experience. Through their socialization into gender roles, girls typically learn to be more passive and nurturing than boys. They also tend to define themselves, more so than boys, in terms of relationships, caring and attachment. Enduring relationships are valued over those that are short-lived.

Girls also face special challenges that can influence their subsequent involvement in the juvenile justice system, including sexual abuse, neglect and other traumatic and victimizing experiences. Frequently, young women attempt to deal with traumatic experiences through the use of unhealthy coping mechanisms (e.g., abusing substances), and by engaging in self-harming and risky behaviors (including running away from home, a common entry point into the juvenile justice system). Also,

Top Ten Arrest Categories for Girls, 2003

Category	% Female	% Female of All
Runaways	18%	58%
Larceny - Theft	15%	38%
Simple Assault	13%	34%
Disorderly Conduct	9%	24%
Curfew/Loitering Violations	9%	27%
Liquor Laws	5%	31%
Drug Violations	5%	13%
Aggravated Assault	3%	23%
Criminal/Malicious Mischief	3%	10%
Weapons	1%	11%
Top Ten Combined	82%	--

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research suggests that system-involved females experience depression and other forms of mental health problems to a greater extent than do boys. Significantly, the above difficulties can be compounded by issues involving poverty, poor scholastic performance and retention, and limited supports and resources in the community.

The Nature of Gender Responsive Programming

Consistent with this portrait of wide-ranging needs, gender responsive programming for girls is holistic, aiming to comprehensively address all relevant areas of need including physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of young women's lives. It is also sensitive to their gender experience, addressing any history of traumatic experiences, along with emerging unhealthy coping mechanisms. Key goals are to provide treatment or referral for services to address trauma along with various mental health issues, and to replace unhealthy coping mechanisms with more positive skills with which to address trauma issues. All this cannot be fully achieved without first undertaking a comprehensive *assessment* of needs.

A number of additional characteristics of gender responsive programming for females are offered in the literature. The following provides a summary of some key suggestions.

- ✓ Provide a program environment that is supportive, nurturing and safe (physically and emotionally), more so than controlling, punitive or confrontational.
- ✓ Support development of healthy, caring relationships to counter earlier negative, exploitative ones, and provide positive role models both within the program setting and within communities.
- ✓ Focus on enhancing protective factors alongside addressing risk factors, to help build resiliency to challenges faced/to be faced in the community.
- ✓ Work to instill a stronger sense of self, including greater self-awareness, respect for self and sense of self-worth, one important area being greater awareness of (and ability to effectively express) feelings.
- ✓ Help establish clearer direction in life, engaging girls in clarifying life goals and plans for the future.
- ✓ Coinciding with the above, work to achieve greater confidence in one's ability to achieve these goals, along with providing opportunities to develop skills (e.g., problem-solving, coping and educational/vocational skills) needed to succeed.
- ✓ Help develop effective linkages to supports and resources in the community.

When interventions for young females are designed in light of their unique experience, females tend to do better and are more empowered in their own lives. When these programs include a focus on increasing the protective factors and decreasing the risk factors (many often shared by both girls and boys) related to delinquency, in the context of these gender specific differences, positive change in the lives of young women is facilitated.

Some Current Efforts in New Jersey

There has been increased interest in New Jersey in recent years to enhance efforts at providing gender responsive programming for system-involved females (both the juvenile justice system and the broader youth serving system), as well as those at risk of involvement. For its part, the Juvenile Justice Commission, often in concert with New Jersey's Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Committee, has expanded its commitment to achieving progress in this important area, not only in its own female programs but for the broader system as well.

A subcommittee of the JJDP Committee, the Young Women's Action Agenda (YWAA), has established work groups that will be addressing key issues facing system-involved young women. In the fall of 2004 a Notice of Availability of Funds (NOAF) was released to provide JJDP Act funds to establish Young Women's Health Initiative pilot projects to support young women in accessing needed medical and mental health services and support them in creating a life plan for success. Two programs have now been funded under this initiative, with St. Barnabas Hospital serving Monmouth and Ocean counties, and St. Clare's Hospital serving Morris and Sussex. In addition, there are plans to release a NOAF in late 2005 to establish pilot programs that would address the trauma and victimization experienced by many young women.

Readers are encouraged to contact the JJC's Gender Specific Services Coordinator, a position funded by the JJDP Committee, for any desired technical assistance and support. Danielle Hill can be reached at 609-341-3805, or by e-mail at Danielle.Hill@njjc.org.



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