



The current state of gender-specific delinquency programming

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ABSTRACT

Few attempts to identify “what works” in the crime prevention and offender rehabilitation research specifically address gender. The 1992 reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, however, called for new research that would improve the processing and treatment of delinquent girls. This article reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical research that both informed the new legislation and took place in response to it. This is followed by an empirical study conducted to: (1) identify gender-specific programs (GSPs), (2) determine the extent to which GSPs utilize applicable research in their design and implementation, and (3) assess the evidence of GSPs’ impact on targeted outcomes. The findings from the current study suggested that, in addition to strengthening program evaluation methodology, gender-specific programs for girls need to more meaningfully incorporate relevant theories and gender-specific risk and protective factors into their curriculum.

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Introduction

In the past fifteen years, the field of criminology has taken a closer look at delinquent girls and their experiences prior to, during, and after their involvement in the juvenile justice system. The focal point of the practical research has been the design, implementation, and evaluation of gender-specific programs (“GSPs”) for “at-risk” and delinquent girls.

GSPs developed during a time characterized by a call for more detailed information on how delinquency prevention and treatment programs work. The 1992 reauthorization of the 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act specifically requested research to determine the needs of delinquent girls and to develop strategies to address these needs. In this reauthorization, gender-specific services were defined as those “designed to address the needs unique to the gender of the individual to whom such services are provided” (*Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Appropriations Authorization, 1992*).

Although the term “gender-specific” could (and should) be interpreted to be relevant for boys as well as girls, it has become a reference solely to reflect programming for delinquent girls (*Good-kind, 2005*). This is largely explained by the recognition that women and girls have historically been ignored in studies of crime and the detention and institutionalization of female offenders (e.g., *Acoca, 1999*; *R. A. Arnold, 1990*; *Belknap, 2007*; *Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983*; *Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998*) and the professional testimony given to the legislature advocating for the need to address the unique programmatic needs of delinquent girls (*Belknap, Winter, & Cady,*

2003). To this end, a report from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention stated that “gender-specific programming for girls is a comprehensive approach to female delinquency rooted in the experience of girls” (*Greene, Peters, & Associates, 1998, p. v*). Scholars responded to the challenge for research-driven information regarding what “works” for preventing and treating girls’ delinquency, advancing both theoretical and applied empirical research to provide a foundation for a better understanding of the risk-factors for girls’ delinquency and the types and evaluations of GSPs for such girls. This article will provide a brief summary of the research assessing the tenuous role of theory in delinquent girls’ programming, before reviewing the current study, which attempted to identify existing programs and examine their design and evidence of effect.

The tenuous nature of theory in delinquency programming

Many early delinquency programs were not founded upon any theoretical or empirical research (*Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998*). Situating a prevention or treatment program within a theoretical framework is important because criminological theories typically vary in their therapy or policy implications. Similarly, each criminal justice program or practice is based upon some explanation of criminal behavior, or human behavior more generally, regardless of whether it is explicitly stated as such (*Akers & Sellers, 2004*; *Barlow, 1995*; *Gibbs, 1995*).

Theories posit causal relationships between individual, family, peer, and community antecedents and either prosocial or antisocial outcomes, identifying important factors that increase or decrease an individual’s risk for becoming delinquent. Notably, “in most public discourse about criminal justice policy, the underlying theoretical notions are ill-stated and vaguely understood” (*Akers & Sellers, 2004,*

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p. 11). Developers often situate their program within a mixture of several theories, rather than one single tested theory, as a foundation for curriculum development. The role of theory, then, is important in determining the services provided to program participants.

The theoretical foundations of most delinquency programs are theories that were primarily developed and tested through work with boys. More specifically, traditional “correctional programming for female offenders has been based on profiles of male criminality or pathways to crime” (Covington & Bloom, 2003, p. 10). Though feminist scholars have advanced theories relevant to the processing and treatment of girls, they have yet to be fully integrated into criminological practice (Covington & Bloom, 2003; Flavin, 2001). While it is beyond the scope of this article to expand on all relevant theories, it is useful to identify two theoretical perspectives relevant to official responses to delinquent girls.

First, *feminist pathways theory* argues that childhood events, particularly traumas, are precursors to risk factors for (usually) girls' and women's offending behaviors. Research is consistent in reporting that abuse victimization is much more common among incarcerated girls/women when compared to both girls/women in the “community” (general population) and incarcerated boys/men (e.g., R. A. Arnold, 1990; Belknap & Holsinger, 1998; Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983; Daly, 1992; Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Finkelhor & Baron, 1986; Gaarder & Belknap, 2002; Widom, 2000).

Second, *relational-cultural theory* argues that girls' and women's development is based on connection with others and the relationships of meaning to delinquent girls should be addressed through prevention and treatment approaches (Covington, 1998; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). While relationships are important for boys as well, the focus on connection is particularly applicable for females, who are socialized to be more concerned with relating to others. Regardless of whether girls *should* be socialized in this way, many female offenders report the importance of relationships in their lives (e.g., Chesney-Lind & Bloom, 1997; Owen, 1998; Owen & Bloom, 1995).

In practice, programs grounded in feminist pathways theory would provide treatment for abuse and the problems associated with it, such as substance abuse and mental health issues, school failure, unresolved anger, reluctance to trust others, and tendencies to develop unhealthy boundaries in relationships (Greene Peters, & Associates, 1998). Relational-cultural theory (RCT) recognizes the importance of abuse, substance use disorders, and mental health issues, but all as related to the theory's central organizing factor—connection in relationships. Thus, programming consistent with RCT would primarily focus on relationship-building and associated skills, such as communication skills, coping strategies, assertiveness, and self-esteem (Sparks, 2004). These two theories, along with relevant empirical research to be discussed below, can serve significant roles in developing, implementing, and evaluating GSPs.

Literature review

Recent scholarship has appreciably advanced knowledge on female-specific pathways towards delinquency and the risk and protective factors that operate specifically in girls' lives. It is important to note that many of the same factors impact boys, to varying degrees (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Dembo, Williams, Wothke, Schmeidler, & Brown, 1992; Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). “Good” programs for girls should address such target factors as physical and sexual abuse, child neglect, cognitive deficits, lack of traditional social controls, failure to learn social and psychological skills, relationships with deviant friends and relatives, status offenses during adolescence, running away, family distress and fragmentation, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, academic failure, physical and mental health, and gang membership (e.g., Acoca, 1999; R. A. Arnold, 1990; Belknap, 2007;

Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Belknap, Holsinger, & Dunn, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983; Gaarder & Belknap, 2002; Greene, Peters, & Associates, 1998; Loper, 2000; Owen, 1998; Widom, 2000). Through surveys and focus groups with justice-involved girls and their staff and administrators, Bloom, Owen, Deschenes, and Rosenbaum (2002) found that *family problems* were the top risk factor for girls' delinquency, followed by individual problems, peer issues, and school and community factors, respectively. The most powerful protective factors were positive family communication, rules and structure from parents, positive self-image, problem-solving skills, conflict resolution skills, and relationship building.

Many other studies identified the needs of incarcerated girls, including child care arrangements, preservation of the relationship with one's child, social support systems and positive relationship building, mentorship, substance abuse treatment, self-esteem development, mental and physical health, positive and unrushed sexual development, pregnancy and parenting skills, decision-making skills and other prosocial competencies, spirituality, physical and emotional safety, future orientation, gender and ethnic identity development, financial planning, vocational development, education, and sex offense remediation (e.g., Bloom et al., 2002; Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Greene, Peters, & Associates, 1998; Guthrie & Flinchbaugh, 2001; Monster & Micucci, 2005; Morgan & Patton, 2002).

General guidance for program development and implementation

Examined in its entirety, important goals emerge in the research on GSPs for delinquent girls. Some studies identified a multitude of specific goals and others offered suggestions in regards to what good, effective GSPs should look like (Guthrie & Flinchbaugh, 2001; Kempf-Leonard & Sample, 2000; Morgan & Patton, 2002). Accordingly, GSPs should provide safe physical and emotional space and allow girls to develop interdependence, trust in their relationships inside and outside of the program, prosocial competencies, and cultural-based strengths. The programming should train the girls to live independently by providing educational training and information on how to stay healthy, manage a household, and obtain employment.

Gender-specific approaches should be comprehensive to create prosocial changes in individual, peer, and community domains but should also give girls a voice in the design, implementation, and evaluation. Good programs will stretch across the racial, ethnic, and class differences among girls. This is particularly true in regards to substance abuse treatment, as there are many racial and class differences in substance use (Guthrie, Rotheram, & Genero, 2001). Good programs should also comprehensively address trauma and use gender-specific assessment tools, treatment plans, and should clearly explain their theoretical foundations (Bloom & Covington, 1998).

Critical analyses of GSPs reveal that many do not incorporate meaningful discussions, especially deconstructions, of gender, gender roles, and of what it means to be a female in this (U.S.) society (Goodkind, 2005; Schaffner, 2006). Instead, it seems that implementing a program with a group of girls is sufficient to assume it will be meaningful for them as females, though good programs can and should challenge existing gender subordination (Goodkind, 2005; Guthrie & Flinchbaugh, 2001). There are similar concerns for sexuality (Schaffner, 2006) and ethnicity, though the incorporation of ethnic and cultural definitions, values, and norms into GSPs appears to be more developed (Guthrie et al., 2001).

While gender-specific detention centers, treatment programs, and prevention programs have been developed, many of these programs have not been evaluated to determine their impact on areas of needs or delinquency outcomes (Chesney-Lind & Okamoto, 2001). The extent to which these programs truly are tailored to meet specific needs of delinquent girls, or how these programs incorporate such needs into their curricula, is not always clear. As such, the remainder of this article reports on a large-scale literature review conducted to

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