



Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Among Girls in the Juvenile Justice System

Introduction

With increases in the rate of arrests for girls in the United States fast outpacing those for boys, the past two decades has seen increasing attention devoted to understanding the causes, consequences, and solutions for girls who become involved with law enforcement (Kerig, 2018). In 2019, the most recent year for which statistics are available, girls accounted for more than 30% of the estimated 2.11 million juvenile arrests annually (compared to 18% in 1990), and on any given day more than 7,800 girls reside in detention or juvenile corrections facilities in the US (Puzzanchera, 2020). Notably, it is among violent offenses that the greatest increases in arrest rates for girls are seen. For example, rates of arrest for violent offenses—including physical assault, sexual assault, and homicide—increased 78% for girls while declining 6% for boys (Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2012).

Research also indicates that girls in the justice system have higher levels of exposure to psychological trauma and victimization (Kerig, 2018; Modrowski et al., 2021; Tossone et al., 2018) and have higher levels of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, dissociation, suicidality, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior as well as PTSD, in comparison to their male peers (Conrad et al., 2014, 2017; Kerig & Becker, 2012; Tossone et al., 2018). In sum, the growing number of girls in the justice system—and the adverse impact that traumatic stress and related mental health problems has on these girls' safety, health, and development during adolescence (Anderson & Walerych, 2019; Dehart & Moran, 2015; Dembo et al., 2017; Parrish, 2020) and into adulthood (Kerr et al., 2014)—pose special challenges and responsibilities for juvenile justice prevention and intervention programs.

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Why Are There Increasing Numbers of Girls in the Juvenile Justice System?

Careful analyses of data on girls' arrests suggest that the recent increase is not a function of the preconceived notion society has on girls, but rather from changes in mandatory sentencing and law enforcement policies. Termed net-widening or up-criming, these policies have increased the penalties for low-level infractions, particularly those involving substance use and domestic violence, which previously would have resulted in youth being referred to diversion or treatment programs rather than to the courts (Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2012). For example, a review of arrest reports involving almost 1,000 girls in California found that the majority of charges against girls for domestic assault resulted from "non-serious mutually combative situations with parents" (Acoca, 1999, p. 8), such as one girl who hit her father when he attempted to wrest the phone away from her as she called the police for help during a domestic dispute, and another girl whose offense involved

“throwing cookies” at her mother. As these reports suggest, justice-involved girls are even more likely than boys to come from highly discordant homes in which they are both victims of and participants in family conflict. In fact, arrests for assault of a parent or other adult caregiver are over twice as frequent among girls than boys (Zahn et al., 2008; Chesney-Lind & Belknap, 2004). Girls’ exposure to violent trauma and subsequent traumatic stress reactions may play a role in many of these “assaults,” because they often take place in the context of ongoing family violence; nevertheless, it is the girl herself who becomes involved in the legal system.

Of concern as well is that girls appear to receive harsher treatment from the juvenile justice system than boys when they do engage in misbehavior, with girls being almost twice as likely as boys to be detained for status and technical offenses (i.e., violating probation) and to receive more severe punishments than boys for those charges (Watson & Edelman, 2012). Indeed, in a kind of double jeopardy, girls’ involvement in the justice system may be directly driven by their experiences of victimization. For example, girls are disproportionately more likely than boys to be arrested for survival crimes (e.g., running away, shoplifting, involvement in commercial sexual exploitation) that often are associated with attempts to escape a maltreating home environment, just as girls are more likely than boys to be charged for acting-out behaviors (e.g., aggression, truancy, drug use) that often follow from abuse and victimization (Kerig & Schindler, 2014). In a vicious cycle, involvement in all of these delinquent activities is, in turn, related to a higher likelihood of revictimization for girls, particularly by increasing their risks of sexual assault and exposure to violence.

Prevalence of Trauma Exposure Among Justice-Involved Girls

A widely replicated finding is that youth in the juvenile justice system have been exposed to significantly higher rates of traumatic events than community youth (Wood et al., 2002), with rates of psychological trauma exposure generally ranging from to 70%-96% (Abram et al., 2002; for a comprehensive review see Kerig & Becker, 2012). In addition, although the prevalence rates differ across studies, the weight of the evidence suggests that many girls in the justice system have experienced even higher rates of victimization than their male peers. Particularly those forms of abuse that occur in the context of close personal relationships such as being the direct victims of family violence and sexual assault (Conrad et al., 2014, 2017; Tossone et al., 2018):

- Using data from the NCTSN Core Data Set, Dierkhising and colleagues (2013) found that, among the 658 youth who became involved in the juvenile justice system, the overall elevated rates of exposure to trauma were further differentiated by gender for two categories: girls were twice as likely as boys to report sexual abuse (31.8% versus 15.5%) and girls were four times more likely than boys to have experienced sexual assault (38.7% versus 8.8%).
- In a sample of girls that were court-mandated to be out of home placements, 76% reported having experienced sexual abuse and 93% had documented histories of physical or sexual abuse (Smith et al., 2006).
- In a sample of over 1,300 detained youth, Kerig and colleagues (2012) found that, whereas boys were more likely than girls to have experienced violence in the community, girls were significantly more likely than boys to report having been the victims of family violence (37.8 % versus 14.9 %) as well as sexual abuse (35.1% versus 6.7%).
- In a sample of 264 youth in detention facilities, Ford and colleagues (2008) found that girls and boys were equally likely to have experienced a range traumatic stressors but that girls were 8 times more likely than boys to report past sexual abuse and 2.5 times more likely to report past severe neglect.
- In one of the few studies to compare detained and community youth, Wood and colleagues (2002) found that, among justice-involved youth, girls were almost 10 times more likely than boys to report having been raped or sexually molested (29% versus 3%). In addition, these experiences were three times more prevalent among justice-involved girls than a matched sample of high school girls.

Beyond the specific types of potentially traumatic experiences to which youths may be exposed, there appears to be a sub-group of children and adolescents who have been subjected to multiple types of victimization, termed polyvictimization. Rates of polyvictimization are high in justice-involved samples and are associated with the most significant emotional and behavioral health problems (Charak et al., 2019, 2021; Dierkhising et al., 2019; Modrowski et al., 2021). In addition, there are gender differences in the pathways toward polyvictimization (Kerig, 2018). For example, in a nationally representative sample of children and adolescents, Turner colleagues (2010) found that exposure to community violence best described the pathway to polyvictimization for boys whereas polyvictimized girls were more likely than boys to live in families were characterized by high levels of violence, conflict, and parental mental health problems. Thus, living in families in which traumatic adversity is ongoing – often complicated or driven by external structural adversities (e.g., socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities) and intergenerational patterns of victimization -- may place girls at particular risk for both pervasive traumatic victimization and for involvement in the juvenile justice system.

- In a nationally representative sample of over 3,000 youth assessed via a telephone-administered structured interview, Ford and colleagues (2010) found that girls were more likely than boys to be polyvictims, and that polyvictimization was predictive of delinquency as well as depression and PTSD.
- In a sample of almost 2000 youth in juvenile detention, Ford and colleagues (2013) also found that justice-involved girls were significantly over-represented amongst the polyvictims and girls were under-represented in the sub-group who had experienced few or no trauma exposures.
- Among 1,049 youth in detention, Charak and colleagues (2021) found that girls were more likely than boys to be placed in a polyvictimized group overall and that the risk was especially heightened for Latinas.

Prevalence of PTSD and Posttraumatic Reactions Among Justice-Involved Girls

Estimates of the prevalence of PTSD among girls vary widely depending on the kind of assessment performed (e.g., clinical interview vs. self-report), the source of information (e.g., youth vs. caregiver), the definition of PTSD used (e.g., full vs. partial; current vs. lifetime), and the samples drawn (e.g., serious offenders in long-term detention vs. community youth engaged in delinquent behaviors). Studies of community samples indicate that PTSD is 3 times more prevalent among girls than boys (e.g., 7.3% versus 2.2%; McLaughlin et al., 2013) and, consistent with these gender differences in the prevalence of PTSD in general, the weight of the evidence suggests that justice-involved girls are more likely than boys to meet criteria for a PTSD diagnosis and that girls display more severe PTSD symptoms than their male peers (for a review, see Kerig & Becker, 2012):

- Although the overall rates may differ, many studies of PTSD among detained youth are consistent in showing a higher ratio of girls to boys, with between 25-50 % of girls meeting criteria for a current diagnosis of PTSD, in comparison to 15-30% of boys (Cauffman et al., 1998; Kerig et al., 2009, 2011; Martin et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2002).
- Although girls were not more likely than boys to meet formal criteria for a PTSD diagnosis in Ford and colleague's (2008) detained sample, girls endorsed higher levels of posttraumatic symptoms (as well as problems with alcohol use) and almost twice as many girls than boys reported elevated levels of PTSD symptoms.
- Among justice-involved youth in the NCTSN Core Data set, girls reported significantly higher rates of PTSD symptoms than boys overall, and girls also endorsed more symptoms of posttraumatic reexperiencing specifically (Dierkhising et al., 2013). Similarly, in Modrowski et al.'s (2017) Utah study, girls were twice as likely as boys to meet full criteria for a PTSD diagnosis (27.6% versus 13.6%) and to meet criteria for intrusive re-experiencing of trauma memories symptoms (45.9% versus 29.2%).

Potential Consequences of Trauma Exposure for Girls

Studies consistently find that, among those who are exposed to trauma, girls and women are more likely than boys and men to develop PTSD as a result (Nooner et al., 2012). In addition, traumatized girls are more likely than their male peers to evidence co-morbid disorders, particularly depression, and trauma exposure is differentially associated with a host of other negative psychological and physical outcomes for girls, including substance abuse, self-harm, and participation in risky sexual behaviors (Kerig & Schindler, 2014). Moreover, longitudinal research on the developmental psychopathology of delinquency indicates that maltreatment, victimization, and exposure to traumatic adversities are especially strong predictors of justice-involvement for girls (see Kerig & Becker, 2014). Traumatic adversity disrupts several emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal processes that are important for adolescent development, particularly capacities for affective- and self-regulation, interpersonal trust, and effective problem-solving (Ford, 2020; Ford et al., 2006; Kerig & Becker, 2010). Thus, exposure to traumatic adversity increases the likelihood that girls will resort to unhealthy strategies for resolving conflicts (e.g., physical and relational aggression) and regulating emotions (e.g., drug and alcohol use; self-harm), all of which may increase the risk of—or directly lead to—their involvement in the juvenile justice system.

The negative effects of trauma on girls' capacities to engage in positive interpersonal relationships are particularly noteworthy. As Chamberlain and Moore (2002) suggest, among traumatized girls, heightened stress-reactivity, developmental lags, and other impairments resulting from maltreatment increase the risk for “intra- and inter-relational chaos,” which can in turn result in involvement in ongoing interpersonal conflicts. Exposure to trauma also increases the likelihood of girls' involvement with antisocial romantic partners, which increases the risk not only of justice-involvement but of subsequent re-victimization in the form of intimate partner violence (Kerig, 2014).

Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and Sexual Identity

At each stage of their involvement in the juvenile justice system, risk factors are heightened for BIPOC and LGBTQ girls. Regarding race, studies examining the school-to-prison pipeline, in which harsh responses to child misbehaviors land youth of color in trouble with the law (Mallett, 2017), have found that Black girls are highly disproportionately sanctioned by school authorities. The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality's Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity and the RISE Research team at New York University analyzed the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Civil Rights Data Collection for the 2017- 2018 academic year, concluding that girls of color were over-represented among those receiving harsh discipline, and these racial discrepancies were significantly more marked among girls than among boys (Epstein, Godfrey, Gonzales & Javdina, 2020). Specifically, compared to White girls, Black girls experienced 4.19 times the risk of being suspended, 3.99 times the risk of expulsion, 3.66 times the risk of being arrested at school, and 2.17 times the risk of being restrained. Girls who identified as Latina, Native American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and multiracial also were disciplined more harshly than were White girls although not always at rates that were higher than those experienced by their male peers. Based on data from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Puzzanchera, 2020), Latinx girls were more likely (27 per 100,000) to be incarcerated than White girls (24 per 100,000), and that disparity was drastically higher for Black girls, who were more than three times as likely as White girls to be incarcerated (77 per 100,000), and Native American girls were more than four and one half times as likely (112 per 100,000) (Monazzam & Budd, 2023).

In a book reflecting interviews she conducted with Black girls, many of whom had experience with the justice system, Morris (2016) articulates the ways in which childhood victimization sets Black girls on a pathway toward justice involvement through transgressions such as running away from home, living on the streets, or being coerced by abusers into commercial sexual activity. Moreover, Morris' analyses points toward an interaction of racism, victimization, and sexism which “primes” socialization agents to misperceive and respond harshly to these girls' attempts to stave off further victimization by behaving in ways that are assertive and self-actualizing. In short,

as Morris proposes, girls of color are punished and further victimized for trying as best they can to cope with and rise above their victimization. As Baumle (2018) terms it, for girls of color, the pathway to justice involvement is better characterized as the “trauma-to-prison pipeline.”

Heightened risk of harsh sanctions for routine misbehaviors also have been found among LGBTQ girls, who are overrepresented in the justice system at rates significantly higher than their male peers (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012; Majd et al., 2009). Studies have found that many of the risk factors contributing to girls’ involvement in the justice system are even more prevalent among sexual minority status (SMS) girls, including trauma and sexual abuse (Belknap et al., 2012; Saewyc et al., 2006). Moreover, Himmelstein and Bruckner (2011) found that, in nationally representative sample of adolescents, SMS youth, in general, received harsher sanctions for ordinary misbehaviors than did heterosexual and cisgender youth, but that these effects were exacerbated for girls, who were more likely to be put on detention or expelled from school, stopped by the police, arrested, and convicted of their offenses if they identified as LGBTQ; remarkably, these risks were heightened even if girls did not endorse such an identity but simply if had engaged in sexual explorations with other girls.

The disparities and adversities experienced by girls and sexual minority (LGBTQ) youth, especially those of color, have been linked to the “patriarchy and white privilege [that] are continuing characteristics of the juvenile justice system” (Schulze & Bryan, 2017, p. 72).

Within the context of patriarchal societies, institutions arise to respond to the needs of men, including women only peripherally as issues arise ... The development of the juvenile justice system provides one such example. ... For girls, the violation of traditional moral codes regarding femininity became a state matter, as did the rehabilitation of delinquent girls into their proper roles as dependent, controllable, and virtuous young women ... Thus, the juvenile justice system focused on curtailing the criminal behavior of boys and enforcing the sexual morality of girls. ... The early twentieth century laws of morality relied on the assumption that young women require protection from degenerative outside forces and from themselves. In comparison with men, women during this era were presumed to have a reduced capacity for decision making. Therefore, it was imperative for patriarchal authority figures like fathers, husbands, or judges to intervene in the lives of women (especially young women) for their own good—further curtailing female autonomy. When fathers were not around, or unable to control their daughters, the justice system became a surrogate parent by upholding traditional, patriarchal family values, often through the “policing” of female sexuality. The paternalistic treatment of young women in the juvenile justice system continued into the late 20th century (Spivak et al., 2014, pp. 225-226).

As a result, in the juvenile justice system, girls are less likely than boys to be adjudicated (i.e., found guilty) of the offense for which they were apprehended by law enforcement. Yet, when girls are adjudicated guilty this is more likely than for boys to be for a status offense such as runaway or being in need of supervision (as opposed to violence, theft, or property destruction). Despite the less severe types of infraction, girls are more likely than boys to be sentenced to confinement rather than placed on probation (Spivak et al., 2014). The adverse synergy created by an intersection of patriarchy and racism is suggested by the additional finding that girls who are Black are at particularly high risk of being sanctioned for status offenses, but not for other types of offenses (Schulze & Bryan, 2017).

Running away is a particularly concerning “offense,” because it often is an attempt to escape a home (or other residential) environment in which maltreatment or violence is occurring. Girls who run away are at high risk for additional victimization, including sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation (Franchino-Olsen, 2021). The confluence of traumatic adversity in primary relationships and running away are associated with a tragically wide range of behavioral health and educational problems as well as with re-victimization (including by sex trafficking), and ultimately with juvenile justice involvement (Franchino-Olsen, 2021). Thus, what may superficially seem to a law enforcement, judicial, or juvenile justice authority as a case of a girl who is oppositional and irresponsible in many, if not most, cases is a girl who attempting to protect herself (and often siblings or peers as well) from victimization.

Impact of Justice-System Involvement on Traumatized Girls

Interviews with stakeholders in the justice system, including staff, parents, and girls themselves, confirm that many characteristics of juvenile court and detention environments can be experienced as re-traumatizing (Ravoira et al., 2012). These include overtly physically intrusive and threatening detention procedures, such as being handcuffed, restrained, or strip-searched; witnessing violence among peers in the facility; or observing takedowns and other kinds of restrictive procedures being implemented against other youth by staff (Ford & Blaustein, 2013). In addition, traumatized girls also may be highly reactive to more subtle trauma reminders, such as gruffness from staff, isolation, and a lack of privacy and control over their bodies. Girls whose posttraumatic reactions are triggered may act out their distress in ways that appear disorganized, disobedient, or out of control, and thus bring further sanctions down upon them. In these ways, involvement in the juvenile justice system and “get tough” policies to redress delinquency may have adverse rather than ameliorative effects on girls (Griffin, 2002).

Further, SMS girls report experiencing discrimination and microaggressions both from other youth and staff, including being punished for openness about their sexuality (Holsinger & Hodge, 2014). Essential will be the creation of trauma-informed juvenile justice systems in which staff are trained to recognize trauma triggers and are prepared to respond to traumatized girls (Baetz et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2012), as well programming that is anti-racist and incorporates gender- and SMS-affirming trauma-informed practices (Chaplo & Kerig, 2018).

Gender-Responsive and Trauma Informed Programming for Girls

Recognition of the distinct pathways girls take toward delinquency has led to a call for gender-responsive intervention and prevention efforts that are directly concerned with the role of trauma in justice-involved girls’ lives (Kerig, & Schindler, 2014; National Girls Institute, 2013; Zahn et al., 2010). Models for gender-responsive programming propose that interventions for girls should be:

- **Holistic** targeting girls’ needs in multiple areas of life
- **Safe** building trust and using trauma-informed principles
- **Strength-based** encouraging the development of confidence and competencies
- **Relational** recognizing the ways that female development hinges on positive relationships
- **Culturally responsive** addressing girls’ needs and risks in the context of diversity related to culture, race, ethnicity, religion, class, and sexual orientation (Walker et al., 2015)

In addition, unique concerns related to girls’ sexual health—including the needs of girls who are pregnant or are already mothers—require special attention and accommodations (Watson & Edelman, 2012). Most importantly, gender-responsive programming for girls in or at risk for juvenile justice involvement must be based on the voices of the girls themselves. This is powerfully demonstrated by the collaborative program based on “a system responsiveness and hierarchy of needs framework” described by Reed and colleagues (2021). Asking girls what they wanted changed resulted in program that included improvements in “services (e.g., better laundry system, longer showers, warmer food), climate (e.g., consistent reward system, confidentiality of grievances), and treatment (e.g., increase focus on gender and culture) to reduce the trauma of incarceration among girls in custody” (p. 50).

Attempts to operationalize these goals have taken two tacks. One strategy has been to develop new gender-responsive interventions specifically for justice-involved girls. This involves a “relational model ...encouraging youth to talk about [negative] emotions as opposed to only focusing on their outward actions ... [to] allow for trust to develop between these youth, program staff, and their peers that allows them to openly express their problems in

a safe environment” (Day et al., 2015, p. 120). Evidence has emerged for the effectiveness of such programming for detained girls with histories of trauma exposure “and who display issues with depression/anxiety, anger/irritability, alcohol/drug, and somatic complaints” (Day et al., 2015, p. 120). However, girls who either do not have extensive trauma histories or who do not have (or are not willing to disclose) problems with depression, substance misuse, or physical health, “the relational models employed within gender responsive programming may be experienced as frustrating, requiring or expecting them to deal with issues they simply do not have or that are less pertinent in their lives” (Day et al., p. 121).

Therefore, an alternative strategy has been to develop gender-responsive accommodations to existing evidenced-based treatments that are informed by an understanding of how traumatic adversity, victimization, and impaired relationships impact girls’ development. This is consistent with the recommendation that gender-responsive programming should be a key component of trauma-informed services for girls involved in juvenile justice (see Branson et al., 2017, Table 3, Cultural Competence Domain, Recommendation 15). This opens the door to avoiding the trap of relying on a one-size-fits-all putatively “girl-focused” to all girls involved in juvenile justice as an alternative to the “boy-focused” one-size-fits-all cognitive-behavioral approach of addressing criminogenic attitudes and replacing “delinquent” behavior with adaptive behavioral strategies. Instead, careful assessment of the factors driving the emotions, cognitive processing, and behavior that have led to legal involvement – with a particular attention to how adapting to survive both traumatic adversity and gender (and racial/ethnic) based stigma, discrimination, and disparities – can result in law enforcement and juvenile justice procedures and programming that meet the actual needs and address the risk factors specific to each girl (Day et al., 2015).

For example, Pepler and colleagues (2004) revised their aggression prevention program to better meet the needs of young girls by adding a mother-daughter relationship component. Similarly, Chamberlain and colleagues (2002) added gender-responsive elements to Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) by preparing foster mothers to respond effectively to the volatility of traumatized girls’ ways of relating with female caregivers; in turn, MTFC therapists help girls to better cope with relational aggression among their peers and to forge healthy sexual relationships with romantic partners. MTFC for girls also has been enhanced by the incorporation of Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral therapy to directly address girls’ trauma (Smith et al., 2012). The importance of using both trauma-focused and relational-focused interventions with justice-involved girls was highlighted by a randomized controlled therapy outcome study in which Ford and colleagues (2012) found that the trauma-focused therapy was most effective in achieving improvements in PTSD and anxiety symptoms, trauma-related beliefs, and emotion regulation, but a client-centered relational therapy was most effective in enabling girls to reduce anger problems and increase their sense of hope.

Summary and Conclusion

This review suggests that trauma-informed and gender-responsive and trauma-informed programming and intervention models in the juvenile justice system are needed to address girls’ needs and to prevent re-traumatization of girls who are at risk for or become involved in the juvenile justice system. Experiences of traumatic adversity, maltreatment, and victimization play a role in placing many girls on the pathway toward delinquency, with these risks heightened for girls of color and those who identify as LGBTQ.

Further, girls who participate in activities that are defined as delinquent—and especially those whose behavior is viewed as “morally objectionable” according to patriarchal and racially-biased societal standards -- are at risk for arrest, detainment, re-traumatization, and the additional long-term consequences associated with polyvictimization. Tellingly, it is in the context of their closest personal relationships that many girls in the justice system have endured their most hurtful experiences and it is also in the context of those relationships that they are most likely to engage in acts that are attempts to protect themselves and others but that are subject to legal sanctions and detainment by definition as evidence of delinquency (e.g., truancy, commercial sex trafficking, defensive or reactive aggression, running away). Given the importance of relational ties for girls’ development, the fostering of positive

relationships—with family members, peers, romantic partners, teachers, spiritual advisors, coaches, mentors, therapists, and juvenile justice professionals—has the capacity to play a significant role in helping girls to heal from trauma and desist from a troubled course.

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