



Ecologies of risk among African American girls in juvenile detention[☆]

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ABSTRACT

African American girls are disproportionately represented in juvenile detention, yet less is known about their distinctive and heterogeneous needs, especially regarding their psychosocial contexts. Latent class analysis determined four subgroups based on the adolescent ecology (neighborhood, family, peers) among detained African American girls ages 13–17 (N = 188). The Shielded class (32%) displayed the lowest levels of risk and highest levels of protective factors. The Typical class (24%) was close to the sample average on all indicators, with elevated histories of family incarceration. The Family Distress class (16%) reported the lowest neighborhood risk but was marked by high family risk levels and abuse history. The Highest Risk class (28%) had elevated risk on most indicators but particularly high neighborhood and peer risk. These classes significantly varied by youth social context and mental health. Findings bolster the need to consider the diverse, multidimensional contextual experiences of detained and at-risk African American girls.

1. Introduction

African American youth bear a disproportionate burden of juvenile justice involvement relative to their white peers (Huizinga et al., 2007; Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). During 2013, while accounting for < 13% of the United States (U.S.) population, African American adolescents represented > 35% of persons ages 13 to 18 years who had juvenile justice contact (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2015). A high proportion of juvenile justice contacts come from structural inequalities such as stiffer surveillance, prosecutorial discretion in charging decisions, and imbalances in sentencing for delinquency and substance use incidents (Armour & Hammond, 2009; Henning, 2012; Kahn & Martin, 2016). For example, between 1985 and 2013, across every year and offense category, African American youth were more likely to be detained than their white counterparts. Subsequently, in 2013, African American adolescents made up 42% of the detention caseload, further highlighting disproportionality (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2015).

Although the rates of detention are higher among adolescent males than females, the rates among females are increasing (Hockenberry &

Puzzanchera, 2015). In addition, providers have noted that females entering detention tend to have higher risk profiles (e.g., mental health, sexual risk, victimization) than their male counterparts (Cauffman, 2004; Logan-Greene, Kim, & Nurius, 2016). Similar to their male counterparts, African American adolescent females are over represented in juvenile justice systems when compared to girls from other racial/ethnic groups (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2015). In 2013, compared to white females, African American females were close to three times more likely to receive a court referral for a delinquency offense and 20% more likely to be detained (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2015).

While it is widely accepted that African American adolescent females bear a higher burden of juvenile justice involvement, relative to their female peers, studies on girls of color in the juvenile justice system, including African American girls, are limited (Lopez & Nuño, 2016). In the few studies that exist, findings on mental health, substance use disorders, or victimization have not found differences by race/ethnicity (e.g., Abram et al., 2004). Stereotypes of African American girls (e.g., loud, sexual, crime prone), however, have negatively

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impacted them in the juvenile justice system (Nanda, 2012). Thus, more studies need to examine this vulnerable population. Furthermore, very little is known about significant within-group differences among this highly understudied population (Lopez & Nuño, 2016). Several existing studies (e.g., Dauber, Hogue, Paulson, & Leiferman, 2009; Keller, Cusick, & Courtney, 2007; Logan-Greene et al., 2016) have examined race and gender differences in profiles of risk but few have acknowledged African American females with detention histories as a potentially heterogeneous group. Classifying meaningful within-group clusters among African American females with detention histories might help program planners and prevention/intervention workers address specific needs for early services. This is especially important in reducing the disproportionality of African American female adolescents in juvenile detention.

1.1. Ecological factors

Neighborhood, family, and peer factors significantly correlate with the mental, emotional, and behavioral health of young people (National Research Council, 2009), and these factors are also likely to be important for African American youth with detention histories (Chapman, Desai, Falzer, & Borum, 2006). Arguably, youth who come to the attention of juvenile justice systems reside in “at-risk” environments although they are erroneously referred to as “at-risk youth.” Neighborhood conditions matter such that living in communities with high crime and abandoned buildings, which are characteristic of structural poverty and societal disinvestment, increases the likelihood of substance use and delinquency (Brook, Brook, Rubenstone, Zhang, & Saar, 2011; Stewart & Simons, 2010). For instance, a recent study of 683 African American youth residing in predominantly low-income communities on Chicago’s Southside documented that poor neighborhood conditions (i.e., “broken windows,” a proxy for community violence and poverty) was correlated with a broad spectrum of behavioral health problems. Major findings indicated that participants who reported poorer neighborhood conditions were more likely to report higher rates of delinquency, substance use, and juvenile justice involvement compared to those who lived in better living conditions (Voisin & Kim, 2016).

During adolescence, negative social norms can also exert a major influence over youth problem behaviors especially when positive parental influences are lacking (Janssen, Eichelsheim, Deković, & Bruinsma, 2016; Kiesner, Poulin, & Dishion, 2010). Therefore, negative peer norms often matter with regards to many of the behavioral factors for which youth are detained (Voisin, Neilands, Salazar, Crosby, & DiClemente, 2008). For example, a study of 305 youth investigated whether having no mutual friends, non-deviant friends, or deviant friends would impact levels of delinquent behavior, depression, and loneliness at age 13 (Brendgen, Vitaro, Bukowski, & W., 2000). Major findings showed that adolescents with deviant friends were more delinquent than the other two groups. In addition, adolescents with deviant friends showed similarly problematic levels of depression as friendless youth, but they were less lonely than the latter group of youth. Other studies have confirmed the importance of social relationships to emotional health indicators, such as self-esteem (Wilkinson, 2004).

Family context also significantly matters with regards to shaping youth behaviors, with several studies documenting that parental factors (e.g., monitoring and support) are associated with delinquent behaviors and gang membership (e.g., Hoeve et al., 2009; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). With regards to African American youth, recent findings have shown that family stress and conflict are associated with a broad range of youth behavioral risk factors. Family stress (i.e., having an adult in the home with a history of mental illness, substance use, and incarceration) was correlated with youth substance use, mental health challenges, low school engagement, juvenile justice involvement, and STI risk behaviors even after controlling for age, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation (Voisin, Elsaesser, Kim, Patel, & Cantara,

2016).

Finally, studies have shown the short- and long-term impact of emotional, physical, and abuse on the well-being of young people (e.g., Jung, Herrenkohl, Klika, Lee, & Brown, 2015; Nurius, Green, Logan-Greene, & Borja, 2015). In a 30-year longitudinal prospective study of child maltreatment, Klika, Herrenkohl, and Lee (2013) found that reports of child abuse predicted problem behaviors in childhood, which in turn predicted later crime involvement in adulthood. Youth involved in the juvenile justice system, in particular, report significantly high prevalence of not just abuse, but also other forms of adversity, such as family dysfunction (Baglivio et al., 2014; Dierkhising et al., 2013) and community violence (Morash, 2016). Thus, it is imperative to examine abuse simultaneously with other forms of adversities encountered both in family, peer, and community domains, especially for girls (DeHart & Moran, 2015; Ford, Grasso, Hawke, & Chapman, 2013).

1.2. The present study

The primary aim of this study is to identify meaningful classifications in ecological risk categories across a sample of detained African American female youth. Our intention is to identify profiles of ecological contexts that were associated with behavioral and mental health indicators (e.g., gang affiliation and depression) that bring youth to the attention of juvenile justice authorities. Notably, juvenile justice youth and especially those who are African American females are understudied with regards to their counterparts. In addition, few studies have attempted to discern nuance around within-group differences among this population, which has important implications for targeting various youth profiles for early services and interventions. Identifying meaningful within group classifications among African American females relative to various dimensions of psychosocial risks context can help treatment planning efforts within juvenile justice systems.

2. Materials and methods

Data for these analyses came from baseline data derived from a randomized controlled study designed to test the efficacy of a sexual risk reduction intervention for African American females with juvenile justice histories. The efficacy study is described in detail elsewhere (Blinded for review). From March 2011 to February 2012, African American adolescent females, 13–17 years of age, incarcerated in a short-term detention facility in Atlanta, Georgia were recruited. Eligibility criteria included self-identifying as African American, being 13–17 years of age, and reporting lifetime vaginal intercourse. Adolescents who were married, pregnant, Wards of the State of Georgia, or would be placed in a restricted location upon release (i.e., group home) were excluded from the study. Written informed assent was obtained from adolescents and verbal consent was obtained from parents prior to implementation of any study procedures. Following receipt of parental consent adolescents meeting eligibility criteria completed baseline assessments and were randomized to trial conditions, prior to discharge from the detention facility. Data collection was completed while girls were still in detention. Of the eligible adolescents, 93% (N = 188) enrolled in the study. The [blinded for review] Institutional Review Board approved all study protocols.

2.1. Major study measures

Indicators for the latent class models were selected based on theoretical meaningfulness as proxies for the youth social context spanning family, peers, and neighborhood. We included a parsimonious set of variables to form the classes, as our sample size was small. The following constructs, some continuous and some categorical, were used to form the latent classes.

Broken windows index. This scale (Cohen et al., 2000) assessed neighborhood condition with 3 dichotomous items (1 = yes, 0 = no),

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