



# Risk factors for involvement in delinquency among immigrants and native-born Israeli girls

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the types of offenses girls are involved in, and the contribution of sexual abuse and social control factors among immigrant and native-born Israeli girls in explaining their involvement in delinquency and anti-social behavior.

A total of 93 girls, aged 15–19, participated in the study. Of these, 45.2% were immigrants from the former Soviet Union and 54.8% were native-born Israelis. They answered an anonymous self-reporting questionnaire that examined their level of involvement in several types of delinquent behaviors (such as crimes against a person or public disorder offenses), anti-social behaviors (such as alcohol and cigarette use and involvement in prostitution) and a series of independent variables such as sexual abuse, parental involvement and attachment, and socio-economic status.

We found that girls are involved in a variety of types of offense, including prostitution. We also found that a large number of the participants (61%) had been exposed to sexual abuse during their lifetime. Girls who had been exposed to sexual abuse reported higher levels of involvement in all delinquent behaviors. In addition, the relationship between sexual abuse and drug abuse was mediated by involvement in prostitution. The higher the parental control and the girls' commitment to school and learning, the lower their reports on most of the delinquent behaviors we examined. Immigrant girls reported more than native-born girls on their involvement in most delinquent behaviors. More immigrant girls reported on their involvement in most delinquent behaviors than native-born girls.

The results emphasize the central role that sexual abuse plays in predicting girls' involvement in delinquency: it was found particularly to affect girls' involvement in prostitution and drug use. The study emphasizes the need to develop practice methods that meet the specific needs of girls at risk for involvement in delinquency and anti-social behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Previous studies have located risk factors for anti-social behavior among girls at three different levels: personal-level characteristics (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001), family characteristics (Odgers et al., 2008) and gender–environmental characteristics.

[F]amily factors are important in girls' pathways to antisocial behavior because, first, they are indicators of a cold and unsupportive family climate advanced by the Risky Families Model. . . This family climate reinforces negative coping behaviors, including anger and hostility. . . (Javdani, Sadeh, & Verona, 2011: 1336)

Starting in the late 1980s, studies that examined sexual abuse during childhood found that experience of sexual abuse increases the risk of

women and girls becoming involved in delinquency (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004; Javdani et al., 2011; Widom, 1989). These studies examined outcomes over long periods of time (Siegel & Williams, 2003) and are effective in demonstrating that sexual abuse should be considered a risk factor, promoting exposure to further victimization and risky behaviors such as delinquency and the use of alcohol and drugs.

This study aims to combine two of these levels of risk: family factors (parental attachment and involvement) and gender–environmental factors (sexual abuse) as they are expressed in relation to delinquency (such as crimes against property and the sale and use of drugs) and anti-social behaviors (such as involvement in prostitution and the use of cigarettes and alcohol) among immigrant and non-immigrant girls treated at the Division of At-Risk Youth in Israel.

### 1.1. Female involvement in delinquency

During the past few decades there has been an increase in interest among professionals, researchers and the public at large in the

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phenomenon of delinquent girls and their involvement in anti-social behavior (Javdani et al., 2011).

The existing data from studies carried out in Israel and other countries reveal that the incidence of delinquency among girls is much lower than among boys. In Israel, girls constituted 8.8% of juveniles referred to the Youth Probation Service in 2009 (Zionit, Berman, & Ben-Arieh, 2010). As a result of the low level of girls' involvement in delinquency, many earlier studies focused mainly on males, as they are over-represented in the criminal justice system (Javdani et al., 2011).

However, recent data reveal a reduction in this disparity. In the United States and Europe, the official statistics for delinquency during the past two decades reveal that the number of crimes committed by girls generally has doubled. This includes violent crimes, theft, and status offenses (Asquith, 1998; Chesney-Lind, 2001; Junger-Tas, Ribeaud, & Cruyff, 2004; SAMHSA, 2009).

The discourse in the research and theoretical literature relates to the extent to which the reduction in this disparity and the increase in girls' delinquency reflects a real change in their behavior. It also asks whether the change mainly reflects alterations in the policy regarding treatment of delinquent girls. Existing research tends to stress that the increase is mainly the result of changes on the part of the police and the courts in their treatment of delinquent girls. The present attitude and treatment reflects a reduced tolerance of delinquent behavior among girls (for further discussion see Steffensmeier, Schwartz, Zhong, & Ackerman, 2005).

## 1.2. Theoretical and empirical frameworks

Studies that examined girls' involvement in delinquent and anti-social behaviors stress that these girls are exposed to a variety of risk factors for delinquency. Some of these factors are also relevant for boys, such as neighborhood environment and school involvement. On the other hand, other factors are more specific for girls' involvement in delinquency—such as sexual abuse and the early onset of puberty (Slowikowski, 2010).

## 1.3. Social control and girls' involvement in delinquency

Hirschi's (1969) social control theory is one of the most examined theories in the research that endeavors to explain the involvement of youth in delinquency. According to the theory, youth involvement in delinquency results when their bond to society is weak or broken (Cullen & Agnew, 2003). This social bond has four elements: attachment, commitment, belief and involvement. The present study focuses on three aspects that have been found to be the most central to youthful involvement in delinquency—attachment to parents, parental involvement in the girl's life, and the girl's commitment to conventional activity (Booth, Farrell, & Varano, 2008; Wong, 2005).

Hirschi argued that youth could be attached to peers, teachers and others, although their relationship with their parents is the most important. This is because the family fulfills a central role in the socialization of the child, and influences the molding of the personality of the individual (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). In studies that examined the involvement of girls in delinquency and anti-social behavior, it became apparent that the family constitutes one of the central factors that contributes to or prevents the involvement of girls in delinquency (Hirschi, 2002; Lederman, Dakof, Larrea, & Li, 2004; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Seydlitz & Jenkins, 1998). A central factor regarding the family is the attachment that relates to the emotional and psychological relationship of the boy or girl with their parents. According to the control theory, a breakdown of attachment in the life of the child may lead to involvement in delinquency. Furthermore, a lower level of parental involvement in the child–parent relationship weakens the parents' ability to control the behavior of their children and, thus, the likelihood of their children's involvement in delinquency and anti-social behavior is greater (Hirschi, 2002). The majority of studies that examined the various elements of Hirschi's control theory focused on boys (Booth et al., 2008). The studies during the past

decade that examined the differences between boys and girls regarding the connection between attachment to parents and involvement in delinquency found that the elements of attachment are more significant for girls than for boys (Huebner & Betts, 2002; Laundra, Kiger, & Bahr, 2002). Booth et al. (2008) point out that psychological research in this field found that attachment was more significant for girls than for boys. Girls' sense of self is more connected with positive relationships with their parents than boys', so a breakdown in these relations may constitute a risk factor for delinquency among girls.

However, other studies in this field claimed that the correlation between attachment and girls' delinquency is not consistent, and changes in accordance with the type of crime committed (Mason & Windle, 2002). Thus our study examines the correlation between the attachment and involvement of parents and a wide range of delinquent behaviors (e.g., crimes against persons and property) and anti-social behavior (e.g., prostitution and the use of alcohol and cigarettes).

Another aspect of the control theory that we examine in this study is the commitment with which the individual invests in conventional activities and the extent of their motivation to succeed. According to this theory, involvement in delinquency can adversely affect a boy's or girl's chances of achievement and success. Girls who are committed to success will be less involved in delinquent behavior. Studies that examined this aspect among girls found that the more girls are committed to academic success, the fewer the reports about their involvement in delinquent behavior (Dukes & Stein, 2001; Ozbay & Ozcan, 2008).

In addition to the attributes of attachment and parent involvement, this study examines the correlation between the economic status of the family and the parents' educational level and girls' involvement in delinquency. These attributes were also found to be risk factors for the involvement of youth in delinquency in general, especially in violent crimes (Howell, 2003; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

## 1.4. Immigration as a risk factor in delinquency

Immigration may have many positive effects on different aspects of immigrant life and the community in general (economically, socially and culturally) (Freilich, Newman, Shoham, & Addad, 2002; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1984). Despite these positive effects, immigration can also cause many problems and difficulties both at the general level – for example, through a lack of resources, rising inflation, unemployment and crime (Martinez & Lee, 2000; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) – and, at the personal level, through pressure, stress, family crises and the loss of social and economic standing (Slonim-Nevo, Sheraga, Mirsky, Petrovsky, & Borodenko, 2006; Tartakovsky & Mirsky, 2001; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

Israel is considered a country of immigrants: Jews from all over the world are encouraged to migrate there. Between the years 1989 and 2006 about 1.2 million immigrants from the FSU arrived in Israel (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2007). In 2009, 93,000 immigrant children were living in Israel, more than half of whom were from the FSU (Zionit et al., 2010).

The immigration process has unique attributes that are aimed to ease assimilation, including various types of financial aid and the immediate granting of citizenship. The political and ideological basis for many people's immigration is also a positive factor in this process (Titzmann, Silbereisen, Mesch, & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2011). However, studies have shown that immigrants in Israel have to cope with financial, cultural and social problems similar to those faced by immigrants in other countries (Shechory & Ben-David, 2010).

For example, immigrants from the former Soviet Union have undergone a major cultural change, which has been accompanied by a crisis in assimilation in all aspects of their lives (Horowitz & Brosh, 2011). In the course of the assimilation process there has been a breakdown of existing cultural, social and familial conventions. Cultural norms and values that they had been accustomed to for many

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