



An investigation of gender differences in a representative sample of juveniles detained in Connecticut



Elena L. Grigorenko^{a,*}, Tami Sullivan^b, John Chapman^c

^a Yale University, Child Study Center, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Department of Psychology, United States

^b Yale University, Department of Psychiatry, United States

^c Connecticut Court Support Services Division, United States

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ABSTRACT

As the number of females served by the juvenile justice system in the United States continues to grow, both in absolute terms and relative to the number of males, it is important to understand both the general and specific characteristics of delinquent girls and boys regarding their patterns of offending and risk variables. Using systematic random sampling, 20% of all admittees to the state-run juvenile detention centers in the state of Connecticut, USA, were included in a chart review study, forming a sample ($n = 371$, 30.2% girls, age range 11–19 years; mean age = 14.45, $sd = 1.05$) that was analyzed for gender differences with regard to characteristics of offenses. These characteristics were examined for their potential associations with indicators of risk that are routinely collected at admission to detention. Findings indicate a complex set of associations between indicators of offense and risk, highlighting the importance not only of gender, but also of racial/ethnic differences, whose modulating effects appear to be important in understanding these associations. Specifically, girls in detention are characterized by a number of dimensions, some of which align with those for boys and some that are more gender-specific. For example, girls, as a group, demonstrated higher levels of substance abuse, suicide ideation, victimization, and mental-health variability, but these higher scores are more characteristic of girls from minority backgrounds. More research is needed to understand the profiles of juveniles in detention as the variables considered in this work that map onto the literature at large have resulted in effects of small magnitude.

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1. Introduction

The last two decades of juvenile justice (JJ) in the USA have been marked by a dramatic increase in the number of girls (FBI, 2011) served by the system. In 1980 females represented 11% of juvenile arrests for violent offenses, but in 2004 their representation had reached 30%; the number of female juveniles in custody between 1980 and 2003 increased by more than 50% (NMHA, 2003). Currently, females account for approximately one-third of all juvenile arrests in the USA; to illustrate, in 2010, 337,450 girls, compared to 816,646 boys, were arrested and criminally charged (FBI, 2011). Whereas there has been a nationwide decrease in the overall number of juvenile incarcerations, the rate of this decrease in girls has been slower than in boys, 8 vs. 18%, respectively (Patino, 2009). Clearly, these dynamics generate many questions, including: How have girls, initially considered the “forgotten few” (Bergsmann, 1989), become a major constituency in the JJ system? Which girls become offenders and why?

The field has summarized answers to these questions in a series of bulletins produced by the Office of Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention's Girls Study Group (<http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/publications/index.html>) and a number of literature reviews (e.g., Pajer, 1998; Zahn, 2009). Research indicates that adolescent girls who have committed serious crimes have a high likelihood of risky developmental trajectories (Lissen, Doreleijers, Van Dijk, & Hartman, 2000; Odgers, Robins, & Russell, 2010), characterized retrospectively, by causal factors that are endogenous, such as early maturation (Celio, Karnik, & Steiner, 2006) and exogenous, such as higher levels of family adversity (Biswas & Vaughn, 2011); multiple negative life events such as physical abuse and sexual abuse (Dembo, Schmeidler, & Childs, 2007); and much life stress and turmoil (Broidy & Agnew, 1997). Prospectively, their developmental trajectories are characterized by elevated rates of physical and mental health problems, substance abuse, low educational and vocational achievement, and persistent delinquency (MacDonald, 2013; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Tripodi & Pettus-Davis, 2013).

Concurrently, girls in the JJ system have high rates of victimization—33–77% (Ariga et al., 2008; Lederman, Dakof, Larrea, & Li, 2004), substance use—60–87% (Prescott, 1998), disruptive disorders—75% (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002), affective disorders—15–42% (Pliszka, Sherman, Barrow, & Irick, 2000), and physical health problems—50% (Borduin & Ronis, 2012), especially

* Corresponding author at: Yale University, 230 South Frontage Road, New Haven, CT 06519-1124, United States. Tel.: +1 203 737 2316; fax: +1 203 785 3002.

sexually transmitted diseases—at least 20% (Staples–Horne, 2007). Girls and boys served by the JJ system differ in that the girls have more mental health problems (Dembo, Belenko, Childs, & Wareham, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2003; Timmons-Mitchell et al., 1997), especially a heightened prevalence of traumatization (Abram et al., 2004; Cauffman, Feldman, Watherman, & Steiner, 1998; Dixon, Howie, & Starling, 2005) and suicidal ideation (Roe-Sepowitz & Hickie, 2011), and being referred to mental health services more often (Dembo, Williams, & Schmeidler, 1993).

Additionally, a number of large-scale studies have focused on psychopathological symptoms rather than psychiatric diagnoses. Thus, the utilization of the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument–Version 2, MAYSI-2 (Cauffman, 2004; Grisso, Barnum, Fletcher, Cauffman, & Peuschold, 2001; Vincent, Grisso, Terry, & Banks, 2008) has established MAYSI mean scores that are significantly greater for girls than boys for all subscales, with the exception of Alcohol/Drug Use.

With regard to offending, however, males in the system tend to demonstrate greater frequency, severity, and persistence in their criminal behaviors (Zhang, 2004). Notably, other delinquent behaviors (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse, risky sexual behaviors) are not characterized by definitive patterns of gender differences consistently (Biswas & Vaughn, 2011; McClelland, Elkington, Teplin, & Abram, 2004; Zhang, 2004). There is also evidence of gender-dependent differential pathways to violent and nonviolent crimes (Kjelsberg, 2002; Moffitt, 1993; Silverthorn & Frick, 1999).

Yet, although the majority of the literature on male–female similarities and differences in the JJ system is focused on gender as main effect, recently, there has been an accumulation of research differentiating the impact of gender as it is modulated by such variables as race/ethnicity. Such a modulation appears to be at play for risk as well as criterion variables. For example, with regard to risk variables, it has been shown that, although higher levels of family life stress and turmoil have been reported by girls compared to boys, African-American females demonstrated the highest levels of disrupted family life (Gavazzi, 2006). With regard to criterion variables, it has been argued that, just as the presence and magnitude of the disproportionate minority contact have not been established unequivocally (Vazsonyi & Chen, 2010), the evidence suggesting that the contact is more (or less) particularly pronounced for girls is even more inconclusive (Pope, Lovell, & Hsia, 2002).

Also noteworthy, although the literature references the well-established age-crime curves, according to which delinquent and criminal behaviors consistently peak during late adolescence (Farrington, 1986; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Loeber & Le Blanc, 1990), it is less clear whether the age-graded developmental risk operates similarly for juvenile males and females.

Thus, although the body of research on girls served by the JJ system is growing, it is still rather limited compared to that of research on boys in the system. Numerous reasons have been cited for such an imbalance (Patino, 2009; Postlethwait, Barth, & Guo, 2010), and it has been recognized that more relevant research is needed. The purpose of this report is to contribute to that balance and provide an additional appraisal of the role of gender in the association between mental health profiles and the characteristics of delinquent behaviors of detained juveniles. More specifically, the question is whether and how detained boys and girls differ with regard to concurrent characteristics of their mental-health (i.e., risk factors based on the previous literature such as substance abuse, suicidal ideation, traumatic experiences, and current psychiatric diagnoses) and delinquency (i.e., criterion indicators, conceptualized here through number of admissions to detention centers, total charges, and number of serious and violent charges) profiles and the links between them. Based on the existing literature, we anticipate that, in addition to the main effect of gender, there are modulating influences of such factors as race/ethnicity and age.

The unique feature of this work is its capacity to examine these associations among a mixed-gender representative sample and with multivariate profiles of risk and criminality. As per previously published observations (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2003; Hamerlynck, Doreleijers, Vermeiren, Jansen, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008; Lederman et al., 2004; Pechorro et al., 2013), we hypothesized that we would identify gender-specific profiles reliably and comprehensively. Further, we hypothesized that these profiles would only partially replicate published findings as most of these findings were accumulated either in girls-only samples or in a primarily univariate fashion. Finally, we anticipate that the gender-specific profiles are not homogeneous and are nuanced by “other” important variables such as race/ethnicity and age.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A systematic random sample of approximately 20% (every fifth admission) of all adolescents consecutively admitted to juvenile detention centers in Connecticut between the fall of 2005 and the fall of 2006 ($N = 371$), routinely screened for mental health and substance abuse risks within the first 24 h of admission, was ascertained for this chart review study. At the time of data collection, Connecticut had three main juvenile detention centers for pre-adjudicated young people located in three of its larger cities, Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport, with average capacities of 42, 38, and 24 people, respectively. No exclusion criteria were used; every fifth individual on the admission roster was included in this sample. Eight cities in Connecticut contribute 71% of the young people in these detention centers, resulting in a predominantly urban profile of the juvenile justice population in the state (Chapman, Wasilesky, & Zuccaro, 2000). Youths ranged in age from 11 to 19 years (mean = 14.45, $sd = 1.05$), were enrolled in a variety of school grades (range 5–13, mean = 8.86, $sd = 1.15$), and were predominantly male (69.8%) and minority (74.3%). Self-identified racial and ethnic backgrounds were diverse, including African-American (44.5%), Hispanic (29.8%), Caucasian (24.9%), and Asian-American (0.8%). The number of admissions and transfers among these youths for the duration of the data collection varied from 1 to 11 (mean = 2.02, $sd = 1.40$), with the mean length of stay for the first admission at 20.6 days ($sd = 27.1$). Altogether these adolescents accumulated 3200 charges (mean = 8.92, $sd = 5.07$). Using the state guidelines, the charges were classified as serious (74.9%; the number of serious charges per person ranged from 0 to 9, mean = 1.59, $sd = 1.56$) vs. not serious, and violent (83.4%; the number of violent charges per person ranged from 0 to 10, mean = 2.10, $sd = 1.76$) vs. nonviolent.

2.2. Assessments

As indicated above, assessments capturing risk variables are administered at admission. Also upon admission, youths are routinely screened for physical, mental, and dental health problems. Although the screening is carried out by trained detention staff, if any follow-up is indicated, licensed professionals are immediately engaged. Criterion indicators were extracted from the databases of the Judicial Branch of the State of Connecticut. Table 1 presents the corresponding descriptive statistics.

Alcohol problems risk: Adolescent Alcohol Involvement Scale, AAIS (Mayer & Filstead, 1979) is a 14-item paper-and-pencil self-report questionnaire that assesses perceived interference of alcohol use with psychological, social, and family functioning. The scale has been reported to have adequate psychometric properties (Martino, Grilo, & Fehon, 2000; Mayer & Filstead, 1979). According to the previously established cut-off points, the sample was 61.6% non-drinkers (52.9% of the female and 65.6% of the male subsamples); 29.9% nonproblem users (34.1% of the female and 28.0% of the male subsamples);

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