



Child & Adolescent Services Research Center



RESEARCH BRIEF

Gender Differences among Adjudicated Delinquents

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Overview: Females continue to constitute a minority of juvenile delinquents in the United States, but rates of delinquency among juvenile females are increasing. While overall juvenile crime rates dropped in the 1990s, arrest rates for females increased in all major offense categories, with the violent crime arrest rate 85% higher for girls in 1997 than 1987. Despite the shift towards increased female offending and arrests for more serious criminal offenses, research has focused almost exclusively on delinquent males. As a result, little is currently known about the extent to which findings from research conducted with male delinquents can be generalized to females.

Researchers have speculated that delinquency may indicate a more severe disturbance in girls, who may require a greater biological and/or environmental "push" towards delinquent and antisocial behavior. Delinquent females may have more severe antisocial behavior because they are often not arrested until offending has escalated. Several authors have argued that girls involved in the juvenile justice system are likely to have a distinct profile of familial risk factors, such as increase parental abuse and mother-child conflict. Finally, female adjudicated delinquents may also be more likely to suffer from co-occurring psychiatric disorders, such as ADHD, PTSD, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders.

Method: A stratified random sample of adjudicated delinquents (n=513 males, n=112 females) was drawn from San Diego County administrative databases. Of those sampled youth who could be located, 65.7% completed interviews. Psychological symptomatology, DSM-IV diagnoses, and familial risk factors were assessed using parent [Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), Columbia Impairment Scale (CIS), Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (DISC)] and self-report [Youth Self-Report (YSR), Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), DISC] measures.

Results: Female delinquents scored higher on parent- and self-report measures of psychological symptomatology (Figure 1) and had higher rates of DSM-IV mental disorders than did male delinquents (Figure 2). Girls also experienced greater incidences of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, physical neglect, and family history of mental illness than

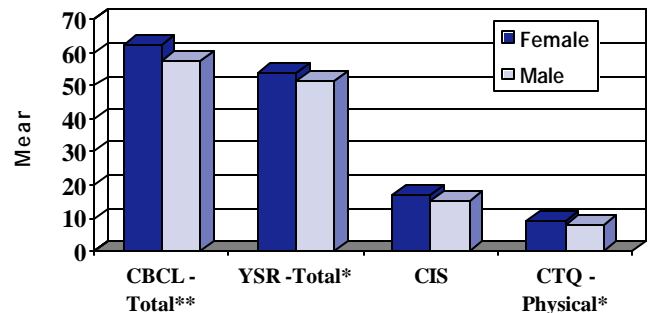


Figure 1: Gender differences in psychological symptomatology, functional impairment, and familial risk factors among adjudicated delinquents. *p<.05; ** p<.01

their male counterparts. No gender differences were found on parental ratings of youth functional impairment, substance use disorders, comorbidity, or parental history of antisocial behavior.

Conclusions: Findings indicated that female adjudicated delinquents have significantly higher rates of psychopathology, maltreatment history, and familial risk factors than males. The high rates of psychopathology indicate that these girls represent a population in great need of mental health services. Recognition of the unique needs of female juvenile delinquents at an early stage is an important first step towards improving the poor adult outcomes facing many of these girls.

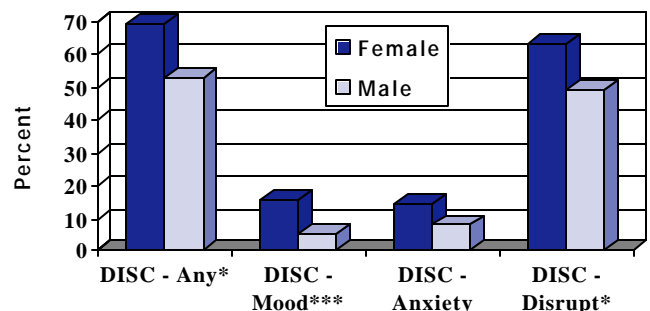


Figure 2: Gender differences in prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses among adjudicated delinquents. *p<.05, ***p<.001

A complete account of this study can be found in the Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Vol. 41(7), pp. 860-867. For more information, please contact Dr. McCabe at atkmccabe@casrc.org

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