



Girls and Violence: Is the Gender Gap Closing?

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Public concern about girls' aggression and violence has rarely been higher. This is particularly true after a hazing incident at Glenbrook High School on May 4, 2003, that was videotaped and given extensive media coverage. Instead of simply using covert or "relational" aggression against their victims (gossiping or spreading rumors about them), this collection of senior girls kicked, punched, pushed, and beat girls with bats. This is all in addition to smearing girls with pig intestines, feces, urine, fish guts, coffee grounds, and paint. Charged with misdemeanor battery, these girls have served as a high profile example that girls' well-documented "meanness" can sometimes result in physical violence (Meadows & Johnson, 2003). It was also a story that capped off over a decade of media coverage about apparent increases in girls' physical violence.

We have always had "bad" girls and media eager to showcase their waywardness. In the 1990s we had the female gang members, who, like their male counterparts, carried guns, killed people, and practiced brutal initiation rituals (Chesney-Lind, 1997). In the 1960s and 70s we had female revolutionary figures like Leslie Van Houten and Friederike Krabbe, who carried guns and fought alongside their rebellious male counterparts (Klemesrud, 1978). Then there were the "mean girls" that ushered in the new millennium (Talbot, 2002). In many ways, the Glenbrook High girls just became the latest in a long line of "bad" girls for a country that grew up reading Longfellow's poem about his daughter: "when she was good, she was very, very good, but when she was bad she was

horrid." (Longfellow, 1992, p. 513) The case, though, also raised a larger question. Are girls closing the long-standing "gender gap" in violence?

Trends in Girls' Arrests

In order to understand the renewed focus on girls' violence, it is important to review the crime trends that drew media attention to youth violence in general. In fact, although the U.S. had experienced relatively stable crime rates from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, violent crime rates for juveniles soared during this period. By the mid-nineties, the grim statistics regarding adolescent violence gained national attention. Among the more sobering statistics was an approximately 70% increase in youth arrest rates for violent offenses and a nearly 300% growth in youth homicide arrest rates from 1983 to 1994 (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Soon the attention of the media was drawn to what some were calling an "epidemic of youth violence" (Cook & Laub, 1998).

Criminologists largely explained the epidemic as a product of three unique trends (mostly relevant to boy's violence): introduction of new crack markets to inner-cities, increased distribution of guns to juveniles, and the involvement of gangs in the crack and underground gun markets (Blumstein, 1995; Blumstein & Cork, 1996; Blumstein & Wallman, 2000). The theory went as follows: young gang members used guns to solve the disputes arising within new and unstable crack markets. Gang members' reliance on guns to solve these disputes eventually spread to their non-drug dealing friends

and set off a pattern where guns became the solution to a wide range of conflicts that youths confronted in their everyday lives (Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2004).

The vast majority of violent perpetrators and victims during the youth violence epidemic were boys and young men of color, so the media coverage of the “epidemic” was initially focused on boys. However, while boys and men were the primary individuals driving the violence arrest statistics, by the mid-nineties boys’ arrests began to decline while girls’ did not—a fact that was also not lost on the media. Between 1992 and 2003, girls’ arrests increased 6.4% while arrests of boys actually decreased by 16.4%. While decreases were seen across many crimes of violence for both boys and girls, the period saw a 7% increase in girls’ arrests for aggravated assault during a period that showed a 29.1% decrease in boys’ arrests for this offense. Likewise, arrests of girls for assault climbed an astonishing 40.9% when boys’ arrests climbed by only 4.3% (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2003).

Concomitant with these arrest increases were increases in girls’ referrals to juvenile courts from police and other sources (like school officials and parents). Between 1990 and 1999, the number of delinquency cases involving girls increased by 59 percent (from 250,000 to 398,600) compared to a 19 percent increase for males (from 1,066,900 to 1,274,500) (Stahl, 2003). Looking at specific offense types, the report observed: “The growth in cases involving females outpaced the growth in cases involving males in all offense categories. For both males and females, simple assault cases increased more than any other person offense (136% for females and 80% for males)” (Stahl, 2003, p.1).

Finally, and most significantly, the detention of girls (a focus of three decades of “de-institutionalization efforts”) has suddenly increased. Between 1989 and 1998, girls detentions increased by 56% compared to a 20% increase seen in boy’s detentions, and the “large increase was tied to the growth in the number of delinquency cases involving females charged with person offenses (157%)” (Harms, 2002, p. 1).

Clearly, more girls were arrested in the last decade, and they were being arrested for “non-

traditional” offenses like assault and aggravated assault. It seemed that just when the public and policy makers were able to put aside their fears of the juvenile super predator, they had a new and problem on their hands: violent girls. Is this really the case? Are girls really getting more violent?

Reasons to Be Skeptical

Actually, there are several reasons to be highly skeptical of the recent increases in the arrest rates of girls for violent aggression. Most significantly, several self-report data sources revealed that boys’ and girls’ violence *decreased* dramatically in the late 1990s, thus indicating that the youth violence epidemic had waned significantly. What is most interesting is that self-reports indicated that girls’ rates of violence decreased more dramatically than boys’ rates.

The CDC has been monitoring youthful behavior in a national sample of school aged youth in a number of domains (including violence) at regular intervals since 1991 in a biennial survey entitled the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (see Table 1). A quick look at data collected over the last decade reveals that while 34.4% of girls surveyed in 1991 said that they had been in a physical fight in the last year, by 2001 that figure had dropped to 23.9% or a 30.5% decrease in girls’ fighting; boys’ violence also decreased during the same period but less dramatically—from 50.2 to 43.1% or a 14.1% drop (Centers for Disease Control, 1992-2002). A logistic analysis of these trends (for the years 1991-1997) published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* concluded that the analyses revealed decreases in physical fighting for both male and female students. The decrease for females was larger, suggesting they had a “steeper decline.” (Brener, Simon, Krug, & Lowry, 1999, p. 444).

Further support of this notion comes from recent research on girls’ violence in San Francisco (Males & Shorter, 2001). Their analyses of vital statistics maintained by health officials (rather than arrest data) conclude that there has been a 63% drop in San Francisco teen-girl fatalities between the 1960s and the 1990s, and they also report that hospital

injury data show that girls are dramatically under-represented among those reporting injury (including assaults) (girls are 3.7% of the population but were only 0.9% of those seeking treatment for violent injuries) (Males & Shorter, 2001, p. 1-2). They conclude: "Compared to her counterpart of the Baby Boom generation growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, a San Francisco teenage girl today is 50% less likely to be murdered, 60% less likely to suffer a fatal accident, 75% less likely to commit suicide, 45% less likely to die by guns, 55% less likely to become a mother, 60% less likely to commit murder, and 40% less likely to be arrested for property crimes" (Males & Shorter 2001, p. 1). If girls were getting more violent, in San Francisco and elsewhere, one would expect other systems (like hospitals and health departments) to also be noting this trend, but that is not happening.

Data from Canada, which has also seen a barrage of media coverage of girls' violence, also indicate that violent female delinquency is rare, even among incarcerated girls. A report on delinquent girls incarcerated in British Columbia notes that "despite isolated incidents of violence, the majority of offending by female youth in custody is relatively minor" (Corrado, Odgers, & Cohen, 2000, p. 189). Surprisingly, a recent study of girls tried and convicted as adults in the U.S. also found the majority of the girls had committed relatively minor offenses (Gaarder & Belknap, 2002).

Finally, there are the arrest data on forms of violence, other than assault. Surely if girls were, in fact, getting progressively more violent, eventually that would show up in arrests for other crimes of violence, like robbery and murder. Yet, consistently, arrests of girls for more serious crimes of violence, including the most lethal, have shown decreases, not increases. As an example, arrests of girls for the offense of murder actually decreased by 42.8% in the period between 1993 and 2002 and female robbery arrests were down by 36.2% (FBI, 2003). If girls were simply getting more violent over all, wouldn't this eventually show up in other forms of the same behavior? These data, too, suggest something else, something specific to the arrest process in the area of assaults, is changing.

What's Going On?

If girls' behavior is not becoming more violent, then what explains the huge increases in female arrests for violence? There are three forces likely at work: "relabeling" (some times called "bootstrapping") of girls' status offense behavior, "rediscovery of girls' violence," and "upcriming" of minor forms of youth violence (including girls' physical aggression) (see Chesney-Lind & Belknap, 2003 for a full discussion of these issues). Let's take each in turn.

Relabeling: Behaviors that were once categorized as status offenses (non-criminal offenses like "runaway" and "person in need of supervision") are sometimes being relabeled into violent offenses. This cannot be ruled out in explanations of arrest rate shifts, nor can changes in police practices with reference to domestic violence.

The recent focus on mandatory arrest as a policy for domestic violence cases has had a very real, and one would hope, unintended consequence: a dramatic increase in the numbers of girls and women arrested for this form of "assault." A recent California study, for example, found that the female share of domestic violence arrests increased from 6% in 1988 to 16.5% in 1998 (Bureau of Criminal Information and Analysis, 1999). African American girls and women had arrest rates roughly three times that of white girls and women in 1998: 149.6 per 100,000 compared to 46.4 (Bureau of Criminal Information and Analysis, 1999).

Such an impression is supported by case file reviews of girls' cases. Acoca's (1999) study of nearly 1000 girls' files from four California counties found that while a "high percentage" of these girls were charged with "person offenses," a majority of these involved assault. Further, "a close reading of the case files of girls charged with assault revealed that most of these charges were the result of nonserious, mutual combat, situations with parents." Acoca details cases that she regards as typical including: "father lunged at her while she was calling the police about a domestic dispute. She (girl) hit him." Finally, she reports that some cases were

quite trivial in nature including a girl arrested “for 7-8). In another study, a girl reported that she was arrested for “assault” for throwing a Barbie doll at her mother (Belknap, Winter, & Cady, 2001). In a number of these instances, the possibility that the child, not the parent, is actually a victim cannot be completely ignored, particularly when girls and defense attorneys keep reporting such a pattern. Marlee Ford, an attorney working with the Bronx Defenders Office, commented “Some girls have been abused all their lives. . . Finally, they get to an age where they can hit back. And they get locked up.” (Russ, 2004, p. 20).

Rediscovery: Girls have always been more violent than their stereotype as weak and passive “good girls” would suggest. A review of the self-report data reviewed in Table 1 clearly indicates that girls do get into fights and they even occasionally carry weapons; as an example, in 2001, about a quarter of girls reported that they were in a physical fight, and about one in twenty carried a weapon. Until recently, girls’ aggression, even their physical aggression, was trivialized rather than criminalized. Law enforcement, parents, social workers, and teachers were once more concerned with controlling girl’s sexuality than they were with their violence, but recent research suggests that may be changing.

A related phenomenon “**upcriming**” is likely also involved in the increases in girl’s arrests. Upcriming refers to policies (like “zero tolerance policies”) that have the effect of increasing the severity of criminal penalties associated with particular offenses. It has long been known that arrests of youth for minor or “other” assaults can range from schoolyard scuffles to relatively serious, but not life threatening assaults (Steffensmeier & Steffensmeier, 1980). Currie (1998) adds to this the fact that these “simple assaults without injury” are often “attempted” or “threatened” or “not completed” (p. 40). A few decades ago, schoolyard fights and other instances of bullying were largely ignored or handled internally by schools and parents. But at a time when official concern about youth violence is almost unparalleled and “zero tolerance” policies proliferate, school principals are increasingly likely to call police onto their campuses. It should

come as no surprise that youthful arrests in this area are up as a consequence—with both race and gender implications. Specifically, while African American children represent only 42% of the public school enrollment, they constitute 61% of the children charged with a disciplinary code violation. And these violations have serious consequences; according to a U.S. Department of Education’s report, 25% of all African American students, nationally, were suspended at least once over a four-year period (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000).

Focus groups with delinquent girls in Ohio training schools found reports of girls’ attempts to protect themselves have also resulted in girls being expelled from school and even, in one instance, being incarcerated (Belknap, Dunn, & Holsinger, 1997). For example, when asked why she was incarcerated, one girl told a story of her otherwise “clean” delinquent record until she carried a knife to school. She had repeatedly told school authorities that an older boy in the school was following her as she walked to and from school and that she was afraid of him. The school refused to look into it, but when the girl put a knife in her sock in order to protect herself getting to and from school, the school’s “no tolerance” code for weapons kicked in. This girl reported extreme frustration regarding the school’s tolerance of this boy stalking and sexually harassing her, but no tolerance for her attempts to protect herself when they would not.

Yet another example of upcriming was found in a study of juvenile robbery in Honolulu. When the number of youth arrested for this potentially troubling offense nearly doubled in the mid-nineties (with a tripling of female arrests for this traditionally male and violent offense), a detailed analysis of police files was undertaken both before and after an increase in arrests—1991 and 1997 (Chesney-Lind & Paramore, 2001). Comparing the details of offenses during the two time periods, it was noted that the age of offenders shifts downward, as does the value of items taken. In 1991, the median value of the items stolen was \$10.00; by 1997, the median value had dropped to \$1.25. Most significantly, the proportion of adult victims declines

sharply while the number of juvenile victims increases. In short, the data suggests that the problem of juvenile robbery in the city and county of Honolulu is largely characterized by slightly older youth bullying and “hi-jacking” younger youth for small amounts of cash and occasionally jewelry and that arrests of youth for these forms of robbery accounted for virtually all of the increase observed.

Upcriming, like zero tolerance policies, can have very troubling implications for economically marginalized communities, since they have always been heavily monitored and policed. The relabeling and upcriming of girls’ minor offenses (including status offenses like “incorrigibility”) to assault and other criminal offenses have been particularly pronounced in the official delinquency of African American girls (Robinson, 1990; Bartollas, 1993). This practice also facilitates the incarceration of girls in detention facilities and training schools—something that would not be possible if the girl were arrested for non-criminal status offenses.

Perhaps this explains why, amidst rising detentions of girls, it is girls of color who are increasingly likely to be detained. According to the American Bar Association, African American girls make up nearly half of those in secure detention, and they are also far less likely than their white counterparts to have their cases dismissed; seven out of 10 cases involving white girls were dismissed compared to three out of ten of African American girls (ABA, 2001). While not as specific in terms of gender, the same pattern appears to be found in the detention of Latino youth; according to a Michigan State University study, between 1983 and 1991, the percentage of Latino/a youth in public detention centers increased by 84%, compared to an 8% increase for White youth and 46% increase for youth overall (Villarruel, Walker, Minifee, Rivera-Vázquez, Peterson, & Perry, 2002).

What About Girls Violence?

Finally, gender matters in girls’ aggression. In her analysis of self-reported violence in girls in Canada, Artz (1998) found that violent girls reported significantly greater rates of victimization

and abuse than their non-violent counterparts, and that the girls who were violent reported great fear of sexual assault, especially from their boyfriends. Moreover, 20% of violent girls stated they were physically abused at home compared to 10% of violent males, and 6.3% of non-violent girls. Patterns for sexual abuse were even starker; roughly one out of four violent girls had been sexually abused compared to one in ten of non-violent girls (Artz, 1998). Follow-up interviews with a small group of violent girls found that they had learned at home that “might makes right” and engaged in “horizontal violence” directed at other powerless girls (often with boys as the audience). Finally, male and female use of violence differed, with girls’ violence against other girls often an outgrowth of relational aggression as opposed to boys’ use of aggression for instrumental purposes (like robbery).

Violence Prevention and Girls

Knowing all this, how do we think about violence prevention and girls? First, we can recognize the context within which girls’ aggression, and the societal response to it is lodged. Lyn Mikel Brown (2003) notes that in a society that celebrates anything male, “girls simply find it easier and safer to take out their fears and anxieties and anger on other girls rather than on boys or on a culture that denigrates, idealizes, or eroticizes qualities associated with femininity. Girlfighting is not a biological necessity, a developmental state, or a rite of passage. It is a protective strategy and an avenue to power learned and nurtured in early childhood and perfected over time” (p. 5-6). We can challenge girlfighting by teaching girls to talk candidly about anger, and creating spaces where girls can practice voice and activism, according to Brown.

Similarly, we need to be conscious that even well intended and seemingly gender and race “neutral” policies can have terrible unintended consequences. This report has outlined the serious consequences for girls, particularly African American and Latina girls, when minor forms of youthful behavior are criminalized. Instead, we need to advocate for better and more nuanced responses to

child abuse, domestic violence, and school violence, and we need to implement gender responsive violence prevention programs. We finally need to actively seek opportunities (like meetings with journalists or editors) to challenge media images of crime that sensationalize girls' violence rather than contextualizing it.

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In Brief: **Girls and Violence: Is the Gender Gap Closing?**

Reading the paper or watching television it's hard to avoid the impression that girls' violence has increased dramatically over the last decade. Headlines like "Ruthless Girlz," "Are Girls Getting Meaner?," and "Bad Girls" all warn of the new face of youth violence. This report reviews the objective evidence regarding youthful female violence, makes suggestions about what is occurring, and then briefly suggests ways that those who work with and care about girls can address the issue positively.

First, there certainly appears to be evidence that we are seeing a change in girls' violence, if one reviews trends in juvenile arrests. Between 1992 and 2003, girls' arrests increased 6.4 percent while arrests of boys actually decreased by 16.4 percent. While decreases were seen across many crimes of violence for both boys and girls, the period saw a 7 percent increase in girls' arrests for aggravated assault during a period that showed a 29.1 percent decrease in boys' arrests for this offense. Likewise, arrests of girls for assault climbed an astonishing 40.9 percent when boys' arrests climbed by only 4.3 percent (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2003).

This report reveals, though, that other sources of data on youthful misbehavior, most specifically data collected by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on "self-reported" delinquency, paint an entirely different picture of girls' behavior over the last decade. A quick look at their data reveals that while 34.4 percent of girls surveyed in 1991 said that they had been in a physical fight in the last year, by 2001 that figure had dropped to 23.9 percent or a 30.5 percent decrease in girls' fighting; boys' violence also decreased during the same period but less dramatically—from 50.2 to 43.1 percent or a 14.1 percent drop (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1992-2002).

How is this possible? This report suggests that three trends are likely responsible for an increase in arrests of girls' for violent behavior.

- **Relabeling** of girls' status offense behavior into criminal behavior, which sometimes involves the arrest of girls involved in scuffles with family members for assault.
- **Rediscovery** of girls' violence by media and policy makers alike. Self-report data has consistently shown that girls engaged in more violence than arrest statistics indicated, in past decades. We simply did not arrest girls for this behavior, but that has now changed, due to policy shifts in enforcement.
- **Upcriming** refers to policies (like "zero tolerance policies") that have the effect of increasing the severity of criminal penalties associated with particular offenses. Related to "rediscovery," this phenomenon also explains the racialized patterns of enforcement that are observed in the official juvenile justice data. Specifically, when you examine the consequences of labeling girls violent (increased detentions and referrals to court), it appears that certain communities, notably communities of color are being differentially impacted by this new concern about violence among girls.

Careful analysis of trends in girls' violence, then fails to confirm that we face a dramatic increase in this troubling behavior. Research does suggest, though, that when confronting girls' violence, we need to foreground gender (particularly the role played by relational aggression in girls' outbursts with other girls). We also need to look for prevention and intervention programs that give girls ways to be angry appropriately while also empowering them in settings like schools which often tend to ignore, silence, and marginalize them.