Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice

<http://ccj.sagepub.com>

Girls in Detention: The Results of Focus Group Discussion Interviews and Official Records Review

Suman Kakar, Marie-Luise Friedemann and Linda Peck

Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice 2002; 18; 57

DOI: 10.1177/1043986202018001005

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://ccj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/18/1/57>

Published by:

SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://ccj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ccj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Girls in Detention

The Results of Focus Group Discussion Interviews
and Official Records Review

SUMAN KAKAR
MARIE-LUISE FRIEDEMANN
LINDA PECK
Florida International University

This study examined the risk factors related to delinquency in an effort to describe the problem of rising female juvenile delinquency. It also examined the context of family environments in which female juvenile delinquents live. Using a triangulated methods approach, the data collected via focus group discussions with 30 female residents in a Regional Detention Center and 100 official intake records revealed that childhood maltreatment, parental incarceration, and school discipline problems were significant risk factors associated with delinquency. Focus group results also indicated that most female delinquents were victims of sexual and physical abuse. Many had family members who engaged in violence and alcohol and other substance use, and the girls themselves engaged in these activities at a young age. To address the growing problem of female delinquency and develop more effective intervention and prevention programs for girls, it is necessary to understand the importance of the family environment in which girls grow. Prevention and intervention programs should provide gender-specific services for girls as well as adequate services for their families.

Understanding antisocial and delinquent behavior among children and young adults has been the subject of social science research for quite some time. However, much of the research in this area (juvenile delinquency) has focused on understanding boys' delinquent behavior. Very little, if any, attention has focused on understanding the development of similar behavior

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Suman Kakar, College of Health and Urban Affairs, ECS 439, Miami, FL 33199; phone: (305) 348-5992; fax: (305) 348-5848; e-mail: kakars@fiu.edu. The authors gratefully acknowledge the constructive comments of the anonymous reviewers.

Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, Vol. 18 No. 1, February 2002 57-73
© 2002 Sage Publications

in girls. Consequently, girls who have broken the law have entered a juvenile justice system that was designed to help boys, and very few services exist that are gender-specific and cater to the needs of female delinquents. Until recently, female juvenile delinquency has not been considered a serious problem because girls usually have committed only minor offenses and historically have constituted a very small proportion of the juvenile delinquents. It is believed, and to an extent it is a fact, that overall girls pose a smaller problem than male delinquents. They commit far fewer crimes than boys. In 1995, girls accounted for about one fourth of juvenile arrests—25.5% of those younger than 18 in 1995 were female arrests (Maguire & Pastore, 1997). Nevertheless, female juvenile crime has been rising. In 1997, female arrests climbed to 31% (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999). In 1998, girls accounted for 22% of juvenile arrests for aggravated assault and 31% of juvenile arrests for simple assault. Female arrests for weapon violations nearly tripled between 1981 and 1997. During the same period, the larceny rate for girls grew by 40%, whereas the male rate stayed constant (Widom, 2000). There has been a general perception that intervention or prevention of female delinquent or criminal behavior was unnecessary because only small numbers of women were involved. Because such offenses were primarily sexual in nature, female offenders were the exception and their criminality was assumed to be a manifestation of an extreme form of psychological deviance.

Earlier research largely ignored female delinquency under the pretext that female offenders were “on the whole a sorry lot” (Glueck & Glueck, 1934). Other researchers, such as A. D. Smith (1962), have focused on the girls’ “precocious sexual development” as the root cause of their delinquency. Additionally, development of antisocial behavior in girls was considered similar to that in boys; however, some of the later empirical studies that included findings on adolescent girls along with boys suggested that significantly different risk factors for delinquency exist for girls (Simone, Lenssen, Doreleijers, Van Dijk, & Hartman, 2000). Results of these studies also suggested that early predictors of male conduct disorder and delinquency were not as reliable when applied to females (Chamberlain & Reid, 1994; Stattin & Magnusson, 1996). The present study explored delinquent behavior and crimes committed by female juvenile delinquents and examined the context of individuals, as well as the family and neighborhood in which girls grow and develop.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What do we know about female delinquency? Female delinquency rates are increasing. Existing literature on female delinquents has several themes.

A brief review of the literature is presented here. One of the most important and recurring themes is that rates for female delinquency are increasing. Although research about delinquency among girls is still scarce, most of the existing research is descriptive and focuses on documenting the extent and type of crimes committed by girls. Thus, the study of juvenile crime in general shows that young women are far less likely than young men to violate the law; male juveniles commit most of the delinquent acts. More than three quarters of juvenile arrests and juvenile court delinquency cases involve men (Snyder, 1997). In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in the number of young women involved in delinquent behavior. Female involvement in crimes, once seen as an anomaly, has evolved into a significantly growing trend (Budnick & Shields-Fletcher, 1998). During the decade from 1983 to 1993, arrests of female juveniles increased by 31% (compared to 21% for boys). Between 1989 and 1993, the relative growth in juvenile arrests involving girls was 23%, more than double the 11% growth for boys (Poe-Yamagata & Butts, 1996). The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) noted in 1999 that girls account for one out of four arrests of young people in America (Chesney-Lind, 2001).

Not only are the rates increasing but there is also a change in the type of offense committed. There is a trend toward more serious crimes. According to Snyder (1997), just between 1994 and 1995, girls' arrests increased 3% for aggravated assault (vs. a decline of 4.5% for boys), increased 7.7% for other assaults (vs. an increase of 1.8% for boys), and increased 26.6% for drug abuse violations (vs. an increase of 16.7% for boys). Nationwide, girls are becoming involved with the justice system at a younger age. From 1987 to 1991, the number of 13- and 14-year-old girls in juvenile court increased by 10% (Bergsmann, 1994). One in five girls in secure confinement is now aged 14 years or younger.

The literature also indicates that during the past decade, girls have been increasingly involved in the juvenile justice system and allegedly committed crimes that have traditionally been committed by boys. The National Center for Juvenile Justice reported that between 1992 and 1996, the number of arrests of female juveniles for violent crime index offenses increased by 25%, compared with no increase in arrests of male juveniles. Similarly, property crime index arrests of juvenile women were up 21%, whereas arrests of boys declined 4%.

Minorities are overrepresented. Another theme that surfaces in the literature is that ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in the female offender population (Bergsmann, 1989; Campbell, 1995; Community Research Associates, 1997). African American girls comprise nearly half of all those in

secure detention and Hispanics represent 13% (Bergsmann, 1994). Although 65% of the population is Caucasian, only 34% of girls in detention are Caucasian. Seven of every 10 cases involving White girls are dismissed, compared to 3 of every 10 cases dismissed for Black girls.

This upward trend in the nature and extent of delinquency by females has not been taken seriously. The literature suggests that, historically, this increase has not been taken seriously, perhaps because girls who break the law were not perceived as a danger to society. Traditionally, girls have come into contact with the courts for nonviolent status offenses such as curfew violations, running away, or unruly behavior (Chesney-Lind, 1988). Theft cases have accounted for nearly one fourth of girls' arrests (Bergsmann, 1994). According to the FBI Uniform Crime Report, in 1995, 23.5% of arrests of girls younger than 18 years were for larceny thefts. During the same year, 32.5% of all juvenile theft arrests involved girls. Even today, despite the increased crime rate of girls, the girls are almost always invisible when the delinquency "problem" is discussed and largely forgotten when the programs for "delinquents" are crafted (Chesney-Lind, 2001).

The juvenile justice system has a bias toward female delinquents. Another important aspect revealed by the literature is a system bias toward female delinquents. Some studies report that adolescent women as compared to men of similar age and severity of crime are overrated in the justice system, and arrests of girls are more likely to occur for status offenses such as running away, incorrigibility, and so forth (S. Peters & S. Peters, 1998). Although their offenses are typically less violent, girls who break the law are sometimes treated more harshly than boys who commit the same type of crime (Davidson, 1982). For example, because there are fewer community-based services for girls, girls are twice as likely to be detained, with detention lasting five times longer than boys. In addition, girls are detained for less serious offenses. In 1987, 9% of girls in training schools were committed for status offenses, compared to 1.5% of boys (Girls Incorporated, 1996).

Because most of the crimes committed by girls are status offenses and not considered of much significance to the safety of the society, female juvenile delinquents have been an invisible minority whose needs, histories, and issues have gone largely undocumented for decades (Belknap, Holsinger, & Dunn, 1997). Girls who have broken the law have entered a juvenile justice system that was designed to help boys. Existing literature and analysis of data indicate that boys commit an overwhelming number of juvenile crimes, and their offenses tend to be more violent and dangerous than the status offenses committed by girls. This is, perhaps, one of the most important reasons why female delinquents have been overlooked and neglected.

Recent changes, however, are apparent, as society has taken note of the fact that girls' arrests, in spite of constituting only about one fourth of all juvenile arrests, have increased at an alarming rate. More girls are entering the juvenile justice system at younger ages, girls are committing more violent crimes such as assault, and some girls are involved in gangs previously thought to be male turf (R. S. Peters, 1998). Although female offenders have been called "the forgotten few" (Bergsmann, 1989), they are fast becoming too numerous—and their problems too serious—to ignore.

Most female delinquents are poor and are victims of poor family environment and childhood maltreatment. Existing research confirmed that in most cases, girls are victims themselves before they become offenders (Davis, Schoen, Greenberg, Desroches, & Abrams, 1997; Girls Incorporated, 1996; Prescott, 1997). Similarly, according to Dembo, Williams, and Schmeidler (1993), a substantial proportion of girls in the juvenile justice system report a history of childhood victimization through physical and/or sexual abuse. Chesney-Lind and Brown (1999) also reported that young women in the correctional system are mostly poor, undereducated girls of color who have complex histories of trauma and substance abuse.

Most female delinquents internalize their victimization and threaten their own well-being. Existing literature reveals that when girls are angry, frightened, or unloved, they are more likely to strike inward. They may hurt themselves by abusing drugs, prostituting their bodies, starving, or even mutilating themselves (Belknap, 1996). Because girls in crisis are more likely to threaten their own well-being than others', they may not seem dangerous to society. As a result, their needs have been overlooked (Chesney-Lind, 1988). Troubled girls have been the afterthought of a juvenile justice system designed to deal with boys (Bergsmann, 1989; Miller, Trapani, Fejes-Mendoza, Eggleston, & Dwiggins, 1995).

Although most research about delinquency among girls focuses on the extent and type of offenses committed by girls, some researchers more recently have begun investigating females' "developmental pathways to delinquency" (Belknap & Holsinger, 1998). By focusing specifically on girls, researchers are gaining a better understanding of female adolescent development and the factors that put girls at risk of delinquency. Such research has focused on understanding and identifying the risk and protective factors for juvenile delinquency. A growing body of research is beginning to identify developmental pathways most likely to lead girls to delinquency (R. S. Peters, 1998).

In sum, the literature suggests that more girls are becoming involved in the justice system, at a younger age, and some for more violent offenses. Minor-

ities are disproportionately represented, and female delinquents have fewer placement options than their male peers in the juvenile justice system. These girls are poor, undereducated, victims of childhood victimization, and come from families that are permeated with chaos. It is believed that a number of interconnected risk factors rather than one single factor contribute to adolescent girls being at risk of delinquency. A complex interaction between environmental (social, familial, economic) and personal factors (aptitude, maturity, psychopathology) seems to be connected with the appearance and occurrence of juvenile delinquency (Rutter, 1995; D. J. Smith, 1995).

JUSTIFICATION FOR THE STUDY

Female juvenile delinquency is a serious problem and it can no longer be overlooked. Literature describes the adolescent female delinquent as a victim and the causes of delinquency are recognized as being complex. However, one apparent methodological problem in these research studies is that they have been limited to official records or qualitative data. Each source of data in itself is lacking and does not present a complete picture of the girls who get into the juvenile justice system. Official records, although an excellent source of data (Kakar, 1996a, 1996b), fail to capture the victims' or offenders' perceptions of the causes of crime. Similarly, qualitative data present problems of reliability and validity (Kakar, 1996a, 1996b). A combination of two data sources—official data and focus group discussion—to obtain a better understanding of a female delinquent will perhaps be the preferred choice. Therefore, this research used a triangulated methods approach to supplement the official data in-depth material from focus group discussions. The overarching aim of this research was to understand the individual, family, and neighborhood contexts of the adolescents to better understand how criminality during adolescence may develop by using descriptive analysis of official record data and qualitative analysis of focus group discussions. A second purpose was to provide data to policy makers to enhance their understanding of the context in which female delinquency develops. Such understanding is key to designing gender-specific preventive programs that will target vulnerable adolescent girls and keep them on a positive developmental track.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study utilized a mixed methods descriptive design. It used official records of female delinquents detained at one of the regional detention centers in South Florida. Additionally, focus group discussions with female delinquents in three encounter group sessions were conducted. Focus groups

are an excellent source of data collection and are increasingly used to raise issues that are difficult to raise with closed-ended survey questions (Aubel, 1994; Belknap, 1996; Morgan, 1988).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions were: What is the family, psychiatric, social, and behavioral context of adolescent girls in detention? and What are the crimes committed by girls in the past 6 years? The research question addressed through official data was: Is female delinquency associated with childhood victimization, parental incarceration, and school discipline problems?

OFFICIAL RECORDS

Sample Selection

The population for this study consisted of female juvenile delinquents in South Florida. Youth between 12 and 18 years of age in detention were the population, and the record of female offenders detained during the past 6 years at the County Regional Detention Center was the sampling frame. One hundred records were randomly selected after permission had been obtained from the administration at the detention center to review the records. These records were reviewed to determine what type of family, emotional, psychiatric, social, and behavioral factors were assessed at the intake interview and what type of criminal acts the girls had committed.

Variables

The variables were type and violence of crimes committed; family, psychiatric, social, and behavioral factors (see Table 1); and demographic variables.

Dependent and Independent Variables

The dependent variable was delinquency (defined as record of violent behavior) and the independent variables were family, psychiatric, social, and behavioral factors.

Recording of the Information

The intake information gathered by the County Regional Juvenile Detention Center was reviewed. The records represented the source of data. A

TABLE 1
Demographic and Other Characteristics of the Girls in Detention

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>
Age (years)		
12 or younger	10	10
13 to 15	56	56
16 to 18	34	34
	Mean = 14.75	
Race		
Black	66	66
White	26	26
Hispanic	8	8
Family factors		
Parental/peer substance abuse	20	20
Parental incarceration	16	16
Victim of child maltreatment	24	24
Violence in the family	10	10
Psychiatric factors		
Received mental health treatment	4	4
Reported taking psychiatric medications	1	1
Attempted suicide	1	1
Social factors		
Enrollment in special education programs	3	3
Prior record of violent behavior	10	10
Prior record of domestic violence	12	12
Behavioral factors		
Suspension from school	15	15
Perpetrator of sexual abuse	13	13
Accused of setting fire	1	1

recording form was created to enter all the variables of interest in a systematic manner: crimes committed by the youth as well as the personal, behavioral, psychiatric, family, and social factors were reported on the intake forms. Up to six past arrests listed were entered using the systematically coded type and severity designations. The recording form also contained demographic variables.

FOCUS GROUPS

Three independent groups of a maximum of 12 girls participated in focus groups at 3-week intervals. The size of the groups varied, depending on the number of girls volunteering to participate. Three ethnic groups—Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites—were included. The majority of girls were African Americans and Haitian Blacks.

Sample Selection

Girls on the unit were asked if they would like to participate in the study. A letter explaining the goals of the research, participants' rights (e.g., confidentiality), and the voluntary nature of participation was read and given to all the girls and explained in detail to each girl. The detention center administrative staff gave permission to the girls for participation and a correctional officer accompanied them to the cafeteria where the discussions took place.

Procedure

Two experienced researchers conducted the focus group interviews. A semistructured discussion outline indicated the lead questions in the areas of family functioning, parental discipline, sharing affection, and mutual trust. Each girl was given a turn at each question, followed by a general discussion. The girls were encouraged to share their stories in an effort to make them feel more comfortable. The questions addressed the type, structure, male-female roles, discipline methods, award systems, and emotional context of the girls' families. Three focus group discussions, each lasting 1.5 hours, were conducted.

One of two researchers collected the data via note taking and manual recording of the individual stories, descriptions, and arguments while the other one conducted the groups. Permission for tape-recording was not given. At the end of the session, a summary of the notes was read to the group to ensure the accuracy of the data. The data were transcribed and supplemented with observations immediately following the seminar. Once compiled, a qualitative content analysis was conducted.

RESULTS FROM RECORDS REVIEW

Sample Description

The sample consisted of 100 randomly selected records. Table 1 describes the sample. As evident from Table 1, 10% of the participants were aged 12 years or younger, 56% were aged 13 to 15 years, and 34% were aged 16 to 18 years. The mean age was 14.75 years, with a standard deviation of 1.71. The marital status of the girls was not indicated in the files. Of the 100 girls, 26 were non-Hispanic White, 66 were Black, and 8 were Hispanic.

Table 1 also includes descriptions of the family, psychiatric, behavioral, and social factors. Data indicated that 24% of the participants were victims of child maltreatment, 20% had parents who abused alcohol and other substances, and 16% had parents who were incarcerated. Data on psychiatric factors indicated that 4% of the participants reported receiving mental health

treatment, and 1% reported taking psychiatric medications and suicidal attempts or ideation. Data on social factors indicated that 3% of the participants reported enrollment in special education programs in the school system and none of the girls in the sample reported illicit drug and/or alcohol use. Data on behavioral factors indicated that 15% of the girls had suspensions or expulsions from school, 13% were perpetrators of sexual abuse, and 1 girl had set fires.

Data were collected on the type, severity, and number of crimes committed by the participants in the sample. The majority of the youth records (72%) indicated multiple criminal charges. Most common violent offenses were battery (45% of the girls), aggravated assault and battery (45%), and resisting arrest (18%). Additionally, there were high numbers of nonviolent crimes such as petty larceny (34%), burglary (21%), and grand theft auto (18%). Table 2 shows the categories and numbers of crimes committed by the participants.

To address the question of whether female delinquency is associated with childhood victimization, parental incarceration, and school discipline problems, Fisher's exact tests were conducted. Fisher's exact tests are usually conducted to test the hypothesis of whether dependent and independent variables have any association without indicating strength or direction of the association when the number of cells in one or more categories is less than five (Agresti, 1996). Chi-square tests were conducted to determine whether participants' record of childhood maltreatment, parental incarceration record, and the participants' record of school discipline problems have any association with delinquent behavior. Results indicate that the presence of all three or any of the three variables are not significantly associated with the participants' involvement in delinquent behavior. These results are presented in Table 3.

RESULTS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The results obtained through focus group discussions provided interesting insights about the girls in the detention center. Some of the most important findings that emerged through these discussions are presented here.

Family Structure

One of the questions focused on the girls' family structures. About 70% of the girls described their family structures as nontraditional. Only 30% of the girls described a "traditional" family consisting of a mother, father, and siblings, whereas 13% of the girls lived with their mother and mother's boyfriend, 10% lived with their mother and stepfather, 10% lived with their single mother and siblings, 10% lived with their boyfriend and children, 7%

TABLE 2
Categories and Number of Crimes

<i>Category of Crime</i>	<i>Number Committed</i>
Aggravated assault and battery	45
Battery	45
Petty larceny	34
Violation of probation/pickup orders	24
Burglary	21
Grand theft auto	18
Resisting arrest	18
Possession of drugs, including marijuana	15
Abscond/escape	13
Battery on detention deputy/law enforcement/school board employee	10
Grand larceny	10
Retail theft	10
Disorderly conduct	9
Trespassing	9
Failure to appear in court	7
Strong armed robbery	7
Disturbing the peace	6
Property damage	4
Fire a weapon/missile into a dwelling	3
Armed robbery	2
Bomb threat	2
Carrying a concealed weapon	2
Criminal mischief	2
Filing a false fire alarm	2
Loitering and prowling	2
Larceny more than \$300	2
Possession of a weapon	2
Vandalism	2
Aggravated stalking	1
Arson	1
Conspiracy to commit murder	1
Contempt of court	1
Crimes against person	1
Dealing stolen property	1
Failure to obey	1
Fleeing police	1
Hold for administrative	1
Obstructing justice	1
Possession of alcohol	1
Possession of forged instrument	1

lived with their grandmother and siblings, and 3% lived with their stepmother and sister. Official records did not provide such data.

TABLE 3

Fisher's Exact Tests for the Test of Significant Association Between Female Violent Behavior, Childhood Victimization, Parental Incarceration, and School Discipline Problems

Variable	Victim Has a Record of Violent Behavior		Fisher's Exact Test Significance	p Value
	Yes	No		
Victim of abuse				
Yes	1	21		
No	2	76	.530	> .05*
Parental incarceration				
Yes	1	5		
No	2	97	.171	> .05*
School discipline problems				
Yes	2	20		
No	9	69	.548	> .05*

*Not significant.

Violence Common in the Family

Most of the girls reported significant family violence ranging from verbal fighting to physical violence. Throughout the group discussions and during various questions the theme of violence was almost always present. Some cases were very severe, including one where the girl involved and her sister resulted in the death of some family members and others being imprisoned for murder. This is contrary to the information gathered through official records. Although the official records indicated that only 10 girls had families with a history of violence, during focus interviews all of the girls described their families as violent or disruptive, untrusting, and unstable. When asked what it was like to live in their families, the majority of the girls described environments that were full of violence, unstable, and chaotic by most standards. Significant differences were discerned by ethnicity in the participants' perception of family. The role of each girl in the family varied according to ethnic and cultural considerations. In general, all of the participants felt that they could not talk about their problems with their parents or guardians and sought advice from other family members or friends.

Ambivalent Attitude Toward the Family

One of the interesting findings through focus group discussions was the girls' attitudes toward their families. Most girls expressed a sense of belonging and concern for their family members. This was accompanied by guilt for

what they had done to them. At the same time, the majority viewed their family members' motivations with suspicion and anger. Some of the girls described their homes as "full of isolation and loneliness."

Lack of Communication and Understanding

The majority of the participants felt that they could not talk about their problems with their parents or guardians and sought advice from other family members or friends. One girl, who had experienced severe trauma in her family, felt most comfortable with her "peeps," as she called them.

Physical Punishment a Common Form of Discipline

One of the questions asked was, "What happens if you do something wrong?" Several girls reported that they were beaten when they did something wrong. They expressed that beatings were pretty hard. Most of the girls believed that they were beaten or hit by their parents because they had been wrong and deserved being beaten. Others cited punishments such as being grounded and withdrawal of privileges.

Alcohol and Substance Abuse

One of the questions asked about the alcohol and substance abuse by the youth and their families. Almost all girls reported exposure to substance abuse either through friends or family members. Some of the girls reported that they were forced and pressured by family members to sell drugs to obtain money for the family. Several reported that they knew friends who sold drugs for money. Others reported that their parents or stepparents used drugs or alcohol in the home.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study (quantitative and qualitative) confirmed much of what previous researchers had found and have added considerable depth to the description of the interrelatedness of complex contextual factors that may put adolescent girls at risk for criminal activity. Whereas previous research reported violence (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986) and dysfunctional families (Acoca, 1999) as risk factors, in this study most girls in the sample vividly described such violence in their home, which suggested that the family violence may indeed play a major role in precipitating the girls' involvement in delinquency. Chaotic family environment and academic failure also were pervasive in most of these girls' lives. Most girls were poor, of minority

status, and had histories of childhood victimization and alcohol and substance abuse. These findings are consistent with the results of studies conducted by Chesney-Lind and Brown (1999), Artz (1998), Dembo et al. (1993), and Bodinger-Deuriate (1991).

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated that girls in the detention center face a host of risk factors, many of which derived from their family environment, that may contribute to the violent crimes they commit. One of the most recurring themes is the fragmented and chaotic family. Literature suggests that family factors play a significant role in influencing the girls' criminal behaviors. There is some evidence that dysfunctional living environments and exposure to childhood abuse can be significant variables in the development of conduct disorders and increased propensity toward commission of violent crime (Kaplan et al., 1998), but family problems have been only minimally researched.

This study suggests that professionals need to focus much more intensely on the role of family and its influence on girls. Most treatment programs greatly neglect the family perspective. The development of prevention programs aimed at reducing the crime commission needs to be based on a broad understanding of the complex relationship of emotional, social, and family factors. Better knowledge about family dynamics through future research, especially as they relate to ethnicity, will be imperative for informed development of rehabilitation programs for this growing segment of delinquents.

Additionally, this study has uncovered that official records provide only a limited part of the picture and are perhaps not a true reflection of the true situation if they are based on hastily conducted intake interviews. Official records should not be considered sufficient and should not be the only source of data describing delinquents.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although this study has used a distinctive methodological approach—use of official records and focus group discussions—it has limitations. A significant limitation is the convenience sample for the focus groups. Not all members of the population of interest had an equal chance of being part of the study. Some girls were denied participation because of behavior problems, whereas others refused to participate. Those who refused participation may have been different from others. Additionally, the sample size was small. Even though the detention center offered the best opportunity to study this population, a sample from one specific detention center is not representative of the general population of female delinquents in the state or nation. Another limitation was the quality of record keeping and the probability that some important information may not have been captured.

Future studies should use larger and more comprehensive samples and a variety of methods, including the construction and testing of structural models of risk factors for the prediction of criminal activities in girls. The analysis of focus group data revealed that the process leading to delinquency was different for each individual and composed of complex interactions of factors that can only be researched with advanced methodologies.

Although girls constitute only about one fourth of the juvenile offender population, problems in all areas of their life are profound and reflective of significant social issues such as poverty, racism, and family stress. Their problems require the development and implementation of gender-specific services and programs that are designed to meet the unique needs of girls and their families.

REFERENCES

- Acoca, L. (1999). Investing in girls: A 21st century strategy. *Juvenile Justice*, 4(1), 3-13.
- Agresti, A. (1996). *An introduction to categorical data analysis*. New York: John Wiley.
- Artz, S. (1998). *Sex power, and the violent school girl*. Toronto, Canada: Tribal Film Books.
- Aubel, J. (1994). *Guidelines for studies using the group interview technique*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Office.
- Belknap, J. (1996). *The invisible woman: Gender, crime and justice*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Belknap, J., & Holsinger, K. (1998). An overview of delinquent girls. In R. T. Zaplin (Ed.), *Female offenders: Critical perspectives and effective interventions*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen.
- Belknap, J., Holsinger, K., & Dunn, M. (1997). Understanding incarcerated girls: The results of a focus group study. *The Prison Journal*, 77(4), 381-404.
- Bergsmann, I. R. (1989, March). The forgotten few: Juvenile female offenders. *Federal Probation*, 53(1), 73-78.
- Bergsmann, I. (1994). *Establishing a foundation: Just the facts. 1994 Juvenile Female Offenders Conference: A time for change*. Lanham, MD: American Correctional Association.
- Bodinger-Deuriale, C. (1991, September). Female adolescents: What prevention programs need to know (Update No. 9). *The Northwest Reporter*.
- Budnick, K. J., & Shields-Fletcher, E. (1998). *What about girls* (OJJDP Fact Sheet). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Campbell, J. R. (1995, February). Conference focuses on issues facing female juvenile offenders. *Corrections Today*, 57(1), 72.
- Chamberlain, P., & Reid, J. B. (1994). Difference in risk factors and adjustment for male and female delinquents in treatment foster care. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 3, 23-39.

- Chesney-Lind, M. (1988). Girls and status offenses: Is juvenile justice still sexist? *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, 20(1), 144-165.
- Chesney-Lind, M. (2001, February). What about the girls? Delinquency programming as if gender mattered. *Corrections Today*, 38-45.
- Chesney-Lind, M., & Brown, M. (1999). Girls and violence: An overview. In D. J. Flannery & C. R. Huff (Eds.), *Youth violence: Prevention, intervention, and social policy* (pp. 171-199). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.
- Community Research Associates. (1997). *Juvenile female offenders: A status of the states report*. Northglenn, CO: Author.
- Davidson, S. (1982). *Justice for young women*. Tucson, AZ: New Directions for Young Women.
- Davis, K., Schoen, C., Greenberg, L., Desroches, C., & Abrams, M. (1997). *The Commonwealth Fund survey of the health of adolescent girls*. New York: Commonwealth Fund.
- Dembo, R., Williams, L., & Schmeidler, J. (1993). Gender differences in the mental health service needs among youth entering a juvenile detention center. *Journal of Prison and Jail Health*, 12, 73-101.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (1999). *Uniform crime reports for the United States, 1998-1999*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Girls Incorporated. (1996). *Prevention and parity: Girls in juvenile justice*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Glueck, S., & Glueck, E. (1934). *Five hundred delinquent women*. New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Jaffe, P., Wolfe, D. A., Wilson, S. K., & Zak, L. (1986). Similarities in behavioral and social maladjustment among child victims and witnesses to family violence. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 56, 142-146.
- Kakar, S. (1996a). *Child abuse and delinquency*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Kakar, S. (1996b, March). Consequences of child abuse for juvenile delinquency. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 29(1), 47-57.
- Kaplan, S., Pelcovitz, D., Salzinger, S., Weiner, M., Mandel, F., Lesser, M., & Labruna, V. (1998). Adolescent physical abuse: Risk for adolescent psychiatric disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 155(7), 954-959.
- Maguire, K., & Pastore, A. L. (Eds.). (1997). *Sourcebook of criminal justice statistics 1996*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Miller, D., Trapani, C., Fejes-Mendoza, K., Eggleston, C., & Dwiggins, D. (1995). Adolescent female offenders: Unique considerations. *Adolescence*, 30(118), 429-435.
- Morgan, D. L. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Peters, R. S. (1998). *Guiding principles for promising female programming*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

- Peters, S., & Peters, S. (1998). Violent adolescent females. *Corrections Today*, 60(3), 28-29.
- Poe-Yamagata, E., & Butts, J. A. (1996). *Female offenders in the juvenile justice system: Statistics summary*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Prescott, L. (1997). *Adolescent girls with co-occurring disorders in the juvenile justice system*. New York: Policy Research, Inc.
- Rutter, M. (1995). Causal concepts and their testing. In M. Rutter & D. J. Smith (Eds.), *Psychosocial disorders in young people: Time trends and their causes* (pp. 7-35). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Simone, A. M., Lenssen, E. V., Doreleijers, T.A.H., Van Dijk, M. E., & Hartman, C. A. (2000). Girls in detention: What are their characteristics? A project to explore and document the character of this target group and the significant ways in which it differs from one consisting of boys. *Journal of Adolescence*, 23, 287-303.
- Smith, A. D. (1962). *Women in prison*. London: Stevens and Sons.
- Smith, D. J. (1995). Youth crime and conduct disorders: Trends, patterns and causal explanations. In M. Rutter & D. J. Smith (Eds.), *Psychosocial disorders in young people: Time trends and their causes* (pp. 389-490). Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- Snyder, H. N. (1997). *Juvenile arrests 1996* (Bulletin). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Stattin, H., & Magnusson, D. (1996). Antisocial development: A holistic approach. *Developmental Psychology*, 8, 617-645.
- Widom, C. (2000, March 31). Report of the Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Quarterly Meeting (p. 6).

Suman Kakar, Ph.D., is an associate professor at Florida International University, College of Health and Urban Affairs. She specializes in the areas of juvenile delinquency, child abuse, family dynamics, minorities, and violence prevention, and conducts research in these areas. She has published two books: Child Abuse and Delinquency (1996) and Criminal Justice Approaches to Domestic Violence (1998). Her recent publications include articles in Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology, Journal of Crime and Justice, Studies on Crime and Crime Prevention, Journal of Gang Research, and Journal of Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies.

Marie-Luise Friedemann, RN, Ph.D., is a professor and associate director of the graduate program at Florida International University School of Nursing. She is best known for her Framework of Systemic Organization, a theoretical model for nurses and other health professionals who work with families. She is conducting research in family functioning, specifically in those families who abuse substances and take care of elders. Her family assessment instrument (ASF-E) is being used for clinical assessments and research. It has been translated into several foreign languages and was tested with families abroad and with minorities in the United States.

Linda Peck, MSN, ARNP, is a graduate of Florida International University and Broward Community College. She is currently employed by Wexford and works in the psychiatric center at Broward Correctional Institution, a Florida State prison for women.