

Introduction

MARGARET A. ZAHN, ROBERT AGNEW, AND ANGELA BROWNE

With some exceptions, extensive recent scholarship focusing on gender and crime has tended to concentrate on women, not on girls. Longitudinal studies have been conducted with great impact on fields of knowledge; however, most of these, also, did not focus on girls (for example, Farrington 1994; Loeber, Keenan, and Zhang 1997; Thornberry and Krohn 2005). Moffitt and others (2001) and Widom (1995) are notable exceptions. In addition, while existing treatises have provided important windows into girls' involvement in delinquency (see, for example, Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004), no comprehensive review exists of empirical evidence for the causes and correlates of girls' delinquency.

Over the past decade and a half, girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system has increased. It is estimated that there were over 640,000 arrests of females under eighteen in 2006.¹ Arrests were most common for minor crimes, particularly larceny-theft, simple assault, disorderly conduct, and running away from home. A substantial number of girls, however, were arrested for more serious offenses, such as aggravated assault and burglary. Self-report surveys of juveniles suggest that the extent of female offending is much higher. According to the 2006 *Monitoring the Future* survey, for example, 26 percent of female high school students reported involvement in shoplifting, while 32 percent admitted to some sort of theft, and 15 percent reported having been involved in a gang fight (Lloyd et al. 2007). Further, some data suggest that girls' delinquency is increasing faster than boys' delinquency (although see the discussion of this idea in Chapter 3). In 1980, girls

accounted for 18 percent of all juvenile arrests for index crimes. Today, girls account for 29 percent of such arrests. Many of these female offenders come to the attention of the juvenile justice system. For example, almost fifteen thousand girls were in residential facilities in October 2003 (Snyder and Sickmund 2006). Female delinquency, then, is not uncommon and sometimes results in serious sanction by the justice system.

Despite the extensive involvement of girls in delinquency, for many years criminologists neglected the topic of female delinquency. Theories of delinquency were often developed with males in mind and there was little effort to conduct research on females. The juvenile justice system also focused its efforts on male offenders. This has started to change in recent years. Scholars have critiqued much of the theory and research on girls' delinquency and have turned a critical eye toward the treatment of female offenders in the justice system. These critiques have most often focused on adult women, with less attention to adolescent females. (For an important exception, see Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004.) Likewise, organizations such as the National Institute of Justice and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) have become increasingly concerned about female juvenile offenders. A volume on adolescents and female delinquency is sorely needed. This book represents an effort by leading criminologists to meet that need.

This compilation is the result of a year-long effort in which members of the "Girls Study Group" reviewed large bodies of research on the extent and nature of girls' delinquency, the causes and correlates of such delinquency, and the juvenile justice system's response to this delinquency. The Girls Study Group is a multidisciplinary group of academics and practitioners, convened and funded by the OJJDP to determine the state of knowledge in the field of girls' delinquency and, ultimately, recommend effective prevention and intervention programs for girls. (A list of the study group members appears in the Appendix.)

The eleven chapters in this book provide an overview of the research on girls' delinquency, discuss policy implications, and point to areas where further research is critically needed. The book begins with an examination of the major theories or explanations of female delinquency and the "gender gap" in delinquency, that is, the higher rate of male versus female offending. In particular, the Agnew and the Miller and Mullins chapters discuss, in general terms, the effect of a broad range of factors on female and male offending. The Steffensmeier and Schwartz chapter then examines the extent of, and especially recent trends in, female delinquency. Subsequent chapters in the book examine the specific causes of female delinquency in more detail. These causes include biopsychological factors and various features of the social environment, including family, school, peer, gang, and community-level factors. The final chapter considers the role of the juvenile justice system and changes in justice policies in the commitment of girls to treatment or correctional facilities.

Chapter 1, by Agnew, focuses on "mainstream" theories of delinquency, such as strain, control, social learning, and integrated theories. Many of these theories

were developed with males in mind, but Agnew argues that recent versions of these theories have become more sensitive to issues of gender and have much to say about the causes of female offending and the gender gap in crime. At the same time, Agnew acknowledges that such theories are in need of further revision if they are to explain the complex relationship between gender and crime.

Miller and Mullins (Chapter 2) examine feminist theories of girls' delinquency. Although some feminist theorists have questioned the applicability of mainstream theories to the explanation of girls' delinquency, Miller and Mullins argue that "the most promising approach for understanding girls' delinquency is to develop scholarship that draws from the important insights of broader criminological thought, but does so while critically examining the gendered life situations of girls and boys and their impact on delinquency" (p. 33). Miller and Mullins describe the various ways in which feminist approaches can help us better understand female delinquency. Among other things, such approaches point to those social forces that influence the standing of females (and males) on the major causes of crime, the meaning of these causes for females and males, and the response to these causes. Miller and Mullins then describe several recent explanations of female delinquency and the gender gap that effectively draw on both mainstream theories and feminist insights. It is important to note that Agnew and Miller and Mullins discuss many of the same recent theories of delinquency, pointing to the increasing potential for integration between mainstream and feminist theories in recent scholarship.

Steffensmeier and Schwartz (Chapter 3) set the context by providing an assessment of the extent of recent trends in girls' delinquency and the gender gap in boys' and girls' offending. In particular, they focus on an evaluation of the claim that girls' violence is increasing more rapidly than boys'. Based on statistical evidence and data from police, juvenile justice officials, and agency personnel who work with juvenile offenders and delinquent girls, they question whether the increases in girls' violence signify that girls' underlying behavior is changing. Rather, they argue that girls are being arrested for behavior that in the past would have been ignored, would have been handled informally, or would have resulted in less serious charges. While examining the possibility of increased social control of girls' behavior, they take into account how the relative invisibility of girls' delinquency in the past and the gendered nature of violence and delinquency intersect with recent shifts in penal philosophy and enforcement practices.

The Fishbein and others chapter (Chapter 4) focuses on the effect of several major "biopsychological factors" on girls' delinquency. Many psychological and biopsychological factors could be considered. In fact, an entire book could be devoted to these factors. However, Fishbein and others focus on stress reactivity, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, intellectual deficits, early pubertal maturation, and mental health problems as particularly germane to delinquent girls in custody. The authors examine gender differences in the level of and sensitivity to these factors, suggesting that it is this differential sensitivity that is most important to understanding gender differences. It is important

to note that, while Fishbein and others stress the importance of biological and psychological factors, they readily acknowledge that such factors are intimately connected with social factors. Biopsychological and social factors work together to influence offending, although these connections have yet to be explored fully.

Much of the rest of the book focuses on factors related to the social environment. Kruttschnitt and Giordano (Chapter 5) examine a range of family factors associated with girls' delinquency. They review research on the effect of family structure, family processes, and parental criminality on delinquency, paying special attention to whether there are gender differences in such effects. The area of physical and sexual abuse is given special consideration, as victimization experiences have been identified by some as influential precursors of girls' pathways into delinquency. After discussing methodological shortcomings in the research, including the lack of control groups and use of convenience samples, they conclude that sexual abuse is related to delinquency. However, it is not clear whether sexual abuse has a greater effect on delinquency than other forms of maltreatment. There is little evidence that gender conditions the relationship between sexual abuse and delinquency. Furthermore, since peers become increasingly important during adolescence, they suggest that studies connecting extrafamilial influences with familial ones are critical to understanding pathways to girls' delinquency.

In addition to family influences, peer influences have been shown to be important factors in delinquency. Giordano (Chapter 6) reviews the research on the influence of peers, peer groups, and romantic partners on girls' and boys' delinquency. Special attention is given to how these relationships may influence girls and boys differently. They find that some processes influence both genders equally. However, cross-gender relationships appear to be especially important in fostering female delinquency. The implications of these findings for delinquency prevention program development are detailed, with suggestions for offering relationship-focused curricula to supplant some of the health-based programs currently in use.

Peer relationships often take place within the larger social institution of the school. Sociostructural factors related to school are examined by Payne, Gottfredson, and Kruttschnitt in Chapter 7. Here, as in other chapters, the authors note that research has firmly established that certain school-related factors, for example, academic achievement and attachment to school, influence delinquency for both girls and boys. Very few firm conclusions, however, can be drawn regarding gender differences in the magnitude of the effects. School achievement is important for both boys and girls, as is school bonding, with a slightly greater impact of achievement for boys and attachment for girls. Deeper understanding of these differences for varying ethnic and age groups remains an important issue, especially as they intersect with gender.

Of course, individuals, schools, peers, and families are nested in communities. Chapter 8, by Zahn and Browne, distills the extensive literature in this area. While there is a burgeoning literature on neighborhood effects on crime, studies

specifically examining gender differences in neighborhood effects and delinquency are small in number. The Moving-to-Opportunity (MTO) studies and the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) study are two notable exceptions, with each showing substantial differences for girls and boys in terms of impacts of neighborhood environments. In the MTO studies, decreases in violent behavior were seen for all youths who moved to more advantaged neighborhoods. However, suppression effects on property offenses over time occurred only among girls. Other positive effects (e.g., better performance in school and subsequent college attendance) were found for girls but not for boys. Analyses of the mechanisms underlying these gender differences are unclear, however. We also need more information on “good girls” who come from bad, or highly disadvantaged, neighborhoods (Elliott et al. 2006).

Chapters 1 through 8 review primarily quantitative studies and do not focus on specific forms of delinquency. Chapter 9 by Morash and Chesney-Lind reviews the qualitative literature and focuses more specifically on violence and how the various contexts of peers, schools, and communities shape girls’ violent responses. It is in this chapter, and in Chapter 10 on gangs by Miller, that the voices of girls can actually be heard and their various situations more specifically understood. Morash and Chesney-Lind contend that, although girls and boys both fight to maintain status or for self-protection, girls fight to defend their reputation, particularly from sexual accusations, and out of anger at being victimized.

In Chapter 10, Miller dispels popular claims of “new violent female offenders” and outlines both historical and contemporary knowledge about girls’ involvement in gangs—both their extent and type of participation. Drawing on a range of studies examining different types of gangs from different ethnic groups and different locales, Miller evaluates our current knowledge of girls in gangs. She includes the level of gang involvement, girls’ risk factors and pathways into gang membership, and the consequences for girl gang members, such as further risk of victimization and long-term costs of gang involvement for girls.

The book’s final chapter by Feld analyzes changes in the treatment of girls in the juvenile justice system. After three decades of deinstitutionalizing status offenders, the juvenile justice system, Feld says, remains committed to protecting and controlling girls, but without providing resources necessary to respond to their real needs. The failure to provide services creates substantial pressures to circumvent restrictions on the disposition of status offenders by relabeling them or “transinstitutionalizing” them into mental health or chemical dependency treatment facilities. In sum, the increasing confinement of girls appears to be driven by a relabeling of minor forms of girls’ violence from “incorrigibility” to simple assault. The lack of real resources to deal with girls’ needs is a chronic underlying problem.

This book summarizes large bodies of research on the causes and correlates of female delinquency. The evidence suggests that girls and boys are similarly impacted by many causal factors. However, there are different rates of exposure to some causal factors (e.g., sexual assault) and also differential sensitivity to a

number of factors. For example, while associating with delinquent peers increases the likelihood of delinquency for both girls and boys, girls are more affected by romantically involved peers, especially when less serious delinquent acts are considered. Our theories, our research, and our prevention and intervention programs, then, need to be gender informed.

The comprehensive review also identifies enormous research gaps. For instance, although the Girls Study Group had envisioned including research findings on race, class, and ethnic differences in each chapter, the research to support that ambition was not sufficient. Where it was possible to include this information, it is included, although this area remains a research frontier yet to be traversed. There also is a huge gap in distinguishing the causes of delinquency from the causes of arrest and incarceration. Analysis of general populations and the correlates of delinquency for girls are not necessarily the same as correlates of delinquency in girls who are in juvenile justice custody. Sorting out the reasons for this difference is crucial to our ultimate understanding and control of the problem.

In the end, the importance of knowing the causes and correlates of girls' pathways to delinquency is in their implications for preventing offending and treating juvenile offenders. Some of these factors, such as family dysfunction, have similar relevance for girls and boys. Others, such as the impact of dating partners, may have special relevance for girls. Although there has been discussion of gender-responsive programming for females, to date almost all of that discussion relates to adults. While there are similarities between adolescent and adult females, there are also substantial differences. Adolescent girls are subject to school and parental social control, are developmentally immature in brain development and social experience, and experience increasing importance of peers as they go through adolescence. All of these differences require consideration.

While subsequent work of the study group will focus on programs for girls, the foundation for that programming is found in this book. It is the causes and correlates of girls' pathways to delinquency that serve as the necessary background for successful intervention. We invite our readers to enter the world that shapes the formation of delinquent girls and hope they leave with the understanding necessary to improve that world.