So called Girl-on-Girl Violence is Actually Adult-on-Girl Violence

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About the Author

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As arrests of girls for violent offenses rose in the 1990s, public concern about adolescent girls' aggression grew around the notion of girl-on-girl violence. This research briefly explores that idea and argues that young women are indeed experiencing violence, but not necessarily from each other, as much as from the effects of racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and poverty. Indeed, girls suffer more from adult-on-girl violence, evidenced by legislators' refusal to fund infrastructure such as housing, jobs, and schools; voter apathy; and the ruthlessness of a highly-profitable prison system. These factors, more than any change in girls' behavior, have combined to usher in the era of the criminalization of social problems.

This essay is a reflection on a so-called new development, "girl-on-girl violence." I say so-called because it is my intention to complicate the term girl-on-girl violence and introduce the idea that, when we widen our lens to focus on the lives of young women, we see that what we are actually witnessing is a rise in "adult-on-girl violence." My work centers on court-involved girls, young women who have been arrested or are being adjudicated delinquent for violent offenses.1

In March of 2005, in an informal count of juvenile delinquency charges of the 44 girls in detention in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center that day, 50 percent were being detained for violent offenses. Four of those young women were to be automatically transferred to adult criminal court because they were charged with serious felonies. Fourteen percent (6/44) were charged with "Domestic Battery," indicating police suspicion of their perpetration of some kind of family or intimate violence. The framing of girls' violence as domestic battery, a term formerly reserved for wife-beating, points to the cultural shift I wish to describe today.

Nationally, of all persons under the age of 18 arrested in 2003, girls constituted 18 percent of arrests for crimes in what the FBI calls the "Violent Crime Index:" murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (Snyder 2005). Between 1980 and 2003, girls' arrest rate for simple assault increased 269 percent (Snyder 2005). There were over 14,000 arrests of girls for aggravated assault in 2003 (Snyder 2005). Girls accounted for almost one third of arrests for simple assaults in 2003 (Snyder 2005).

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1 This essay is part of the larger project that I worked on while a 2004-2005 fellow at the Great Cities Institute, titled Girls in Trouble with the Law, forthcoming in July 2006 from Rutgers University Press.

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Arrests and adjudication for violent offenses among girls have risen in the past decade, but we can see that this is largely a result of discretionary powers that adults deploy. For example, police arrive at scenes of family and school violence and bring girls in to detention more than previously. Judges look at their cases and adjudicate for aggressive offenses, and probation officers' discretionary assessments include framing young women as aggressive "liars" and "manipulators" (Gaarder et al., 2004). Whether girls are <u>actually</u> more violent or not is under contention.

In headlines around the nation as well as nightly news magazine features, young white women are constituted as "mean girls," and young women of color are regularly depicted as "bad girls gone wild," the latest super-predator on the scene. The behavior has been termed "girl-on-girl violence" and the notion freely circulates that girls' aggressive behavior has caused an epidemic of violence, generating great public concern over young women's behavior, including hearings such as the recent Cook County Commission on Women's Issues' October 20, 2005 hearing on "Girl-on-Girl Violence."

What I want us to notice is that changes are indeed occurring, but not necessarily in the way girls are behaving. Young women have always been involved in physical fights. But girls have not been so thoroughly characterized by that behavior as they are now. Research reveals a complex set of factors driven by the maxim, "Violence against girls provokes girls' violence" (Schaffner, in press).

Contemporary news reports and academic studies tend to produce three ways of looking at the supposed epidemic of girls' violence. Media accounts and theoretical

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literature either virtually deny that girls have any choice in the matter at all, representing them as hapless victims of sexism, racism, and poverty; or they are viewed as calculating, rational killers. The third way they are pictured is out-of-control, over-emotional, vicious, and hysterical.

In the first scenario, girls are depicted as being at the mercy of bad older men preying upon them, inattentive parents who mismanage their children's socialization, or arrest-happy police who gender-profile them into unnecessarily violent offense charges. Pictured as woeful victims, girls in trouble for violence are defended as poor youth who were simply forced or labeled into situations outside of their control.

The second way girls are viewed is as void of decent morals, coldly and rationally looking for ways to commit crimes and violence for money or status. These brave new gangsta girls challenge the boyz' in the hood by being the new liberated female delinquent. These (typically African American or Latina) girls' faces are the ones shown in mug shots in the news, standing accused of stabbing their mothers or beating up their friends.

The third account features them as mean girls, drama queens who give sway to their out-of-control raging hormonal fits of jealousy and uncontrollable petty anger. A spate of films, books, and articles highlighting mean girls and girlfighting suggest that there is concern—and confusion—about what is going on in the lives of urban adolescent girls. All three framings prove inadequate because girls are not simply mean, crazy, or cold-hearted calculating killers, and especially not in the ways that they are sometimes characterized in the media and by juvenile authorities.

This is not to say that young women do not perpetrate violent offenses. In fact, we do a disservice to the small amount of violent perpetrators <u>not</u> to take their actions seriously, slow down and listen to them, and to move resources on their behalf. But to characterize young women as violent misses the point. Not only do these three framing mechanisms oversimplify and ignore nuanced relationships between what sociology likes to call structure, culture, and agency, but criminologists have repeatedly found that there is, in fact, not an epidemic of girl-on-girl violence. What there is an epidemic of is adult denial in facing what it takes to raise healthy children. Legislators' refusal to fund infrastructure such as housing, jobs, and schools; voter apathy, and the ruthlessness of a highly-profitable prison system have combined to usher in the era of the criminalization of social problems.

Structure: Poverty, Sexism, Racism

Girls are born into pre-existing social conditions in which they must figure out how to survive. Sexism, racism, and poverty were here before they got here, yet young women must grow up learning how to navigate their childhoods and adolescence against these powerful social forces.

For example, despite the so-called booming economy of the 1990s, there were 5.6 million <u>American</u> children living in severely distressed neighborhoods in 2000, an 18 percent increase from 1990 (O'Hare and Mather 2003). Seventeen percent of the U.S. population below the age of 18 lives in poverty (ChildTrends 2005). Thirty-three percent of Black children—living at the intersection of racism and poverty—live in poverty

(ChildTrends 2005).[2] Young women from families in poverty or with low socioeconomic class status experience a lack of alternatives, opportunities, and diminished decisional avenues that are made available to them. The young women I interviewed around the nation in juvenile facilities continually raised concerns related to family homelessness and unemployment. Ten percent of the young women in my study entered juvenile corrections homeless. Young women without adequate housing experience tremendous difficulty staying in school and learning to manage a work life. Furthermore, we know that poor girls of color are more likely to be vulnerable to predation by local idle older men hanging around on street corners, more likely to lack access to resources to heal from trauma that occurred earlier in life, and less likely to be protected by the law (Rogers Park YWAT 2003; Veysey 2003; Levine 2003).

Culture: Normalizing Aggression in an Increasingly Violent U.S. Culture

Conventional criminological and psychological explorations have not sustained prolonged focus on the contexts of contemporary violence and assaults in girls' lives. By noting changes in the quality of girls' lives, rather than focusing solely on the overall increase in offenses and arrests, we see that some girls' violence reflects the violence they experience in everyday life. Girls reproduce a freedom to be aggressive, the same freedom to be violent that has seeped into dominant culture in the United States. Displays of aggression and violence are not just inner-city problems. In one nationwide survey of high school students, almost one-fifth had carried a weapon in the last month

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2 In 2004, 14 percent of white children and 10 percent of Asian children lived in poor families, compared with 33 percent of black children and 29 percent of Hispanic children (ChildTrends 2005).

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(17.3 percent) and over one-third (35.7 percent) had been in a physical fight during the last year (Centers for Disease Control 2004).

Not until blood is spilled or police called do court-involved young women perceive community and family violence surrounding them. While 53% of young women report being physically or sexually injured directly, when asked if they had ever witnessed their parents or other combinations of family and household members in physical battle, 71% of the young women in my project answered in the affirmative. However, when asked if they had ever witnessed abuse or if they felt that there was violence in their homes, only a small portion framed abuse and fights as violence. It was as if young women did not see it, and if they did, it was not that bad, according to them.

In a sense, that girls are represented as fighting more—and getting arrested for assaults more—reflects one way that popular culture has normalized aggression. According to the World Health Organization, few countries are as violent as the United States (Elliott et al 1997). Researchers at the American Sociological Association's Congressional Seminar found that only the Bahamas and Ecuador had higher per capita homicide rates than the United States, out of 44 countries studied (Elliott et al 1997). "American society is engulfed in a world of violence," begins an American Sociological Association report on the social causes of violence (Levine and Rosich 1996).

Violence within the family, claims the National Research Council, is reinforced by reports and images in the media, in entertainment programming, and in sports that implicitly condone or promote the use of violence (National Research Council 1994). We

coin popular terms, such as date rape and road rage, for our new violent trends. We make up a phrase (for example, drive-by shooting or girl-on-girl violence) and incorporate it into popular discourse as if it were a fact of life. After spending time listening to young women in detention, I came to see that girls, too, reflect and reproduce the violence that victimizes them.

Agency: Rage, Resistance, and the Social Logic to Girls' Violence

Hidden in the stories behind arrest statistics is an alarming and under-theorized trend. A disproportionate number of girls come into the juvenile system from family histories of physical and sexual violence and emotional neglect. This link between childhood victimization and later juvenile offending has been confirmed by research in a variety of academic disciplines and practitioners among social work, sociology, public health, and criminology (Belknap and Holsinger 1998).

Some studies now estimate that over 90 percent of girls in the juvenile legal system have histories of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse (Acoca and Dedel 1998). Compared to sexual abuse reported, according to one study, by approximately 7 percent of teenage girls in general, this figure is staggering (Moore et al 1989). Girls are often framed by probation officers as being overemotional and needy (Gaarder et al 2005). But one nationwide study conducted by the American Correctional Association of girls in juvenile correctional facilities found that 61 percent of girls had been physically abused and 54 percent had been sexually abused (American Correctional Association 1990). In a nationwide study of adult women in the criminal justice system, researchers

found that almost 68 percent of incarcerated women reported being violently victimized as young girls (Acoca and Austin 1996). Research links these earlier injuries to later troubles.

According to a comparative longitudinal study, abused and neglected girls are nearly twice as likely to be arrested as other juveniles (Widom 2000). Researchers find that children exposed to multiple forms of family violence report more than twice the rate of youth violence as those from nonviolent families (Thornberry 1994). At the Harvard School of Public Health, scholars studied the connection between delinquency and depression and found that 82 percent of girls suffering depression committed crimes against persons, compared to 42 percent of other girls in their study (Obeidallah and Earls 1999). Like young men, young women express depression and distress as aggression (Lamb 1999; Campbell 1994). And, if young women are aggressive, why not ask them what they are so angry about? Like adult women facing unbearable living conditions, girls will tell us about their righteous rage. Understanding this link between sexual injury, aggression, and subsequent system involvement becomes salient as the trope of the violent girl grabs national attention.

Conclusion

Violent crime among youth has actually <u>decreased</u> since the early 1980s, even though arrests have gone up for girls. What has been on the rise, but rarely discussed in the context of troubled female adolescents, are factors such as poverty; unemployment; unsafe and unaffordable housing; underfunded schools; misogynistic

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cultural images of girls and women; the degradation of neighborhood solidarity and dislocation due to gentrification; and the building of more and more detention facilities and prisons. As long as we keep the lens tightly focused on the individual psychology or problem behavior of any single girl or "types" of girls, removed from the context of her/their whole experience, we miss important cues relating to children's troubles.

In the ways I have just detailed, we can see how the rise in arrests of young women for violent offenses is largely a product of <u>adult</u> behavior. Young women are having the same family arguments, even throwing the same books and radios in rage at their parents, but parents call the police more often to ask for assistance dealing with uncontrollable teenagers, especially daughters. In the recent past, parents may have involved grandparents, aunts and uncles, other friends with teenage children, even neighbors. Now, some communities are so thinned down that parents and guardians have no alternative but to turn to social services. When the police arrive, they use their discretion to charge young women as perpetrators.

Of those few actual young women who perpetrate violent assaults, we know they have suffered severe and chronic emotional neglect, physical assaults, sexual abuse—all without redress or redemption. We who work with them see them, not as armed and dangerous, but as harmed and furious.

Many advocates and scholars have been developing and providing "gender-specific" alternatives and community-based services that offer opportunities lost to this population: access to art, music, poetry, sports, politics, dance, rest, travel, reading, nature—activities that are recognized to be generally healing to humans who are

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spiritually injured or depleted. We have learned that young women who are provided with safety, respect, and dignity grow together and encourage each other to be strong, brave, and kind.

Recommendations

We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We already know what to do. It is just that the solutions are not easy, fast, popular, cheap, forcible, or immediately profitable.

1. Reframe the problem "girl-on-girl violence" away from its current location on individual gendered characteristics of some certain kinds of girls, and shift our focus to the systemic, cultural roots of misogyny, racism, and violence against girl children and their mothers, which surely animates girls' aggression.

2. Re-invigorate our vision and join ongoing antiviolence, antiracist, liberationist, and uplift organizations to build social movements to end cultural and systemic misogyny, racism, and violence against all girls and women. In Chicago alone, we have many community-based organizations that are doing this work valiantly. We need to finance, fund, feature, and support these organizations as well as bring the work to our religious organizations, schools, professional organizations, employee training, including offering training as continuing education credits for professional development.

3. We must revitalize our demand for racial and sexual justice. We must each be brave enough to become active vocal antiracist advocates in our work, schools, places of worship, and places of recreation. If we are not talking about the racism

and sexism that targets young women of color, we are not working towards

solving the problem of juvenile justice.

4. We can demand gender-parity and gender-specific interventions in educational and court systems where our culture of women-hating, racism, and violence against women is pervasive.

5. We can discover the wide range of community-based alternatives to detention available in Chicago such as some of those listed at the end of this MEMO.

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Cook County Organizations That Work With Young Women

Directories are very difficult to keep current, but following are a few suggestions for where to look for lists of community-based agencies and non-governmental organizations who work with young women.

Children & Family Justice Center
Northwestern University School of Law
357 East Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL 60611-3069

Global Girls, http://www.globalgirlsinc.org/

Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health:
28 East Jackson, Suite 710
Chicago 60604

YWCA
180 North Wabash
Chicago 60601

Southwest Women Working Together
4051 West 63rd Street
Chicago 60629

CLAIM
220 South State Street
Suite 830
Chicago, IL 60604

Girl Talk, www.girltalkchicago.org

BeyondMedia Arts and Education, http://www.beyondmedia.org/

Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team, rpywat@hotmail.com

Young Women's Empowerment Project, http://www.youarepriceless.org/

Affinity Community Services
5650 S. Woodlawn Ave.
Chicago, IL 60637

Alternatives Inc.
4730 North Sheridan Road
Chicago, IL. 60640

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Chicago Girls Coalition
222 South Riverside Plaza, Suite #2120
Chicago, IL 60606

Gender Equity Fund/AAUW-IL
P.O. Box 146819
Chicago, IL 60614-6819.

Girl Scouts of Chicago
222 S. Riverside Plaza, Suite 2120
Chicago, IL 60606

Girls Best Friend Foundation
900 North Franklin Suite 210
Chicago, IL 60610

GIRLS LINK
69 West Washington St. Suite 2630
Chicago, IL 60602

Mujeres Latinas en Accion
1823 West 17th St.
Chicago, IL 60640

Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago
614 West Roosevelt Road
Chicago, IL 60607

This is ME, Inc.
2709 West Schubert St. Suite 2D
Chicago, IL

Health and Medicine Policy Group
29 E. Madison Street Suite 602
Chicago, IL 60602

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