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**Girl's Delinquency and Services for Girls:
An Overview**

**Testimony
by
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**submitted to the
Special Hearing on Girls' Services and Juvenile Justice**

**Subcommittee on Human Resources
Rep. Matthew Martinez, Chair**

**Committee on Education and Labor
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When people talk about the problem of delinquency, they are generally thinking about delinquent boys. Yet, about a quarter of the young people arrested for juvenile offenses every year in the United States are girls. Who is the typical female delinquent? What causes her to get into trouble? What happens to her if she is caught? Until recently, few people could supply answers to these questions. Now that situation is changing, as the topic of this hearing clearly indicates. A renewed interest in and concern about girl's and women's issues has meant that the long neglected problems of girls in trouble are finally receiving attention.

Contemporary work on female delinquency suggests that while there are many similarities between male and female delinquency, there are also important differences. First, and most importantly, girls tend to be arrested for offenses that are less serious than those committed by boys. About half of all the girls that are arrested are apprehended for one of two offenses: larceny theft (which for girls is often shoplifting) and running away from home. Boys delinquency also involves many minor offenses, but the crimes they commit are more varied.¹

One of the two major "girls offenses"--running away from home--points up another significant aspect of female delinquency. Girls are quite often arrested for offenses that are not actual crimes like robbery or burglary. Instead, they are activities like running away from home, being incorrigible, or beyond parental control. These non-criminal "status offenses" have long played a major role in bringing girls into the juvenile justice system. In fact, in the early years of the juvenile justice system virtually all the girls in juvenile court were charged with these offenses.² The significant role played by status offenses in girls' delinquency is also a major reason why those most concerned with diversion and deinstitutionalization of youth arrested for these offenses must consider, as this hearing does, the special needs of girls; and the urgent need for programs that deal directly and specifically with these needs.

¹Federal Bureau of Investigation. 1990. *Crime in the United States 1990*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

²Chesney-Lind, M. and Shelden, R. 1992. *Girls, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice* Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole.

Currently, status offenses (particularly running away from home and ungovernability) continue to play a major role in female delinquency. In 1990 over half (56.5%) of those arrested for running away from home were girls.³ Moreover, many of the girls charged with status offenses stay in the juvenile justice system. In 1985, the last year for which we have data, girls were a 63% of those appearing for juvenile courts charged with running away from home, and they are about half (42%) of all youth charged with all status offenses; by contrast girls were only 15% of those in juvenile court for criminal offenses.⁴

Why are girls more likely to be arrested than boys for running away from home? There are no simple answers to this question. Studies of actual delinquency (not simply arrests) show that girls and boys run away from home in about equal numbers. There is some evidence to suggest that parents and police may be responding differently to the same behavior. Parents may be calling the police when their daughters do not come home, and police may be more likely to arrest a female than a male runaway youth.

Another reason for different responses to running away from home speaks to differences in the reasons that boys and girls have for running away. Girls are, for example, much more likely than boys to be the victims of child sexual abuse with some experts estimating that roughly 70% of the victims of child sexual abuse are girls.⁵ Not surprisingly, the evidence is also suggesting a link between this problem and girl's delinquency--particularly running away from home.

Studies of girls on the streets or in court populations are showing high rates of both sexual and physical abuse. A study of a runaway shelter in Toronto found, for example, that 73% of the female runaways and 38% of the males had been sexually abused. This same study found that sexually abused female runaways were more likely than their non-abused counterparts to engage in delinquent or criminal activities such as substance abuse,

³Federal Bureau of Investigation. 1991. *Crime in the United States 1990*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, p. 183.

⁴Snyder, H. et al. 1989. *Juvenile Court Statistics 1985*. Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Justice.

⁵Finkelhor, D. and Baron, L. 1986. "Risk Factors for Child Sexual Abuse." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 1: 43-71.

petty theft, and prostitution. No such pattern was found among the male runaways.⁶ Studies of youths in juvenile court populations are also showing large numbers of abused girls. An Arkansas study of girls adjudicated as delinquent found that 53% had been sexually abused, 25% reported scars from beatings, and 38% recalled bleeding from abuse.⁷

Girls on the run from these kinds of homes clearly need help. For many years, however, their accounts of abuse were ignored, and they were institutionalized in detention centers and training schools as delinquents if they refused to stay at home. Girls accused of incorrigibility were also quite likely to be locked up. The reasons for this harsh response are varied. One major problem that girls encounter in the juvenile justice system is a product of their difficulties with their parents. Typically, when a boy is arrested, his parents may be upset with him, but they will generally support him in court. By contrast, girls charged with status offenses have been arrested and in court precisely because they are having problems at home or were on the streets. In this situation, their parents are not their allies and may, in fact, be their prosecutors. In addition, courts are often left with few alternatives other than incarceration since placements for youth in these situations have historically been in very short supply and woefully inadequate to dealing with the psychological problems of troubled youth. The net result was that girls often ended up in juvenile institutions for non-criminal behavior, while their male counterparts did not.

In short, girls who find their way into the juvenile justice system have many problems that they share with their male counterparts, but they also have problems, particularly sexual abuse, that are uniquely tied to their status as girls. Historically, the juvenile justice system has not taken girl's problems seriously, and instead locked them up when they refused to stay at home.

Unfortunately, contemporary judicial responses to girls in trouble still leave much to be desired. Despite over fifteen years of federal efforts to encourage deinstitutionalization of status offenders, for example, there are still many girls who are

⁶McCormack, A., Janus, M.D. and Burgess, A.W. 1986. "Runaway Youths and Sexual Victimization: Gender Differences in an Adolescent Runaway Population." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 10: 387-395.

⁷Mouzakitas, C. M. 1981. "An Inquiry into the Problem of Child Abuse and Juvenile Delinquency." In *Exploring the Relationship Between child Abuse and Delinquency*, edited by R. J. Hunner and Y. E. Walkers. Montclair, NJ: Allenheld, Osmun.

inappropriately detained and incarcerated. A recent study of the nation's detention centers revealed that in 1989 while only 3% of boys were in these facilities for status offenses, over 15% of girls were being held on these charges. The nation's training schools also have an over-representation of girls charged with minor offenses or status offenses. These data reveal that only 14% of girls are incarcerated for serious violent crime while 13% are incarcerated for status offenses. Many girls are incarcerated for simply for non-violent property crimes.⁸

These figures, while cause for concern, do represent some very good news to the supporters of deinstitutionalization. Prior to the passage of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Act of 1974, nearly three-quarters (71%) of the girls and 23% of the boys in the nation's training schools were incarcerated for status offenses.⁹ Between 1974 and 1979 the number of girls admitted to public detention facilities and training schools dropped by 40%. Since then, however, the deinstitutionalization trend has slowed in some areas of the country, particularly at the detention level. Between 1979 and 1989, for example, the number of girls held in these same public facilities actually increased by 10%¹⁰ These figures have also been accompanied by sharp increases in the last decade (1981-1990) of arrests of girls for runaway (up 19%) and curfew violations (up 36.6%). Again, these figures represent a shift away from declines in arrests of youth for status offenses that were seen in the late seventies. Taken together, these trends suggest that strong pressure may be brought to bear on policy makers to reinstitutionalize status offenders.

These pressures should be strongly resisted. Girls needs were never fully considered when initial efforts to deinstitutionalize began in the nineteen seventies. Indeed, after over a decade of "deinstitutionalization efforts," girls remain in the words of one researcher "all but invisible in programs for youth and in the literature available to those

⁸Schwartz, I.M. Willis, D.A. and Battle J. 1991. "Juvenile Arrest, Detention, and Incarceration Trends 1979-1989." University of Michigan: Center for the Study of Youth Policy.

⁹Schwartz, I.M. Steketee, M. and Schneider, V. 1990. "Federal Juvenile Justice Policy and the Incarceration of Girls: *Crime and Delinquency* 36:503-520.

¹⁰Jamieson, K.M and Flanagan, T. (eds). 1987. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics--1988*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, p. 390; Flanagan, T. and McGarrell, E.F. *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics--1985*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice, p. 517; Allen-Hagen, B. 1991. *Children in Custody 1989*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.

who work with youth.”¹¹ A report done in 1975 by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration revealed that only 5% of federally funded juvenile delinquency projects were specifically directed at girls and that only 6% of all local monies for juvenile justice were spent on girls.¹² More recently, an exhaustive study of virtually all program evaluation studies done since 1950 located reports on some 443 delinquency programs; of these 34.8% were exclusively male and an additional 42.4% served "mostly males." Only 2.3% of the surveyed programs that explicitly served only girls, and only 5.9% that served "some males" meaning that most of the programs' participants were girls.¹³

What are the specific needs of young women in general, and those who come in contact with the juvenile justice system either as victims or offenders? Sue Davidson argues that:

The most desperate need of many young women is to find the economic means of survival. While females today are still being socialized to believe that their security lies in marriage and motherhood, surveys of teenage mothers indicate that approximately 90 percent receive no financial aid from the fathers of their children.¹⁴

Likewise, a study of homeless youth in Waikiki,¹⁵ about half of whom were girls, revealed that their most urgent needs are housing, jobs, and medical services. Finally, a survey conducted in a very poor community in Hawaii (Waianae) revealed that pregnant and parenting teens saw medical care for their children, financial assistance, and child care as their major needs. Social workers in the same community, by contrast, saw parenting classes as the girl's most important need, followed by child care, educational and vocational, and family planning.¹⁶ These findings suggest that while youth understand

¹¹Davidson, S. 1983. *The Second Mile: Contemporary Approaches to Counseling Young Women* Tucson: New Directions for Young Women, p. viii.

¹²Female Offender Resource Center. 1977, *Little Sisters and the Law*. Washington, D.C.: American Bar Association, p. 34.

¹³Lipsey, M. 1991. "Juvenile Delinquency Treatment: A Meta-Analytic Inquiry into the Variability of Effects." New York: Russell Sage Foundation (Research Synthesis Committee), p. 58.

¹⁴Davidson, p. ix.

¹⁵Iwamoto, J.J. Kameoka, K. and Basseur, Y.C. 1990. *Waikiki Homeless Youth Project: A Report*. Honolulu: Catholic Services to Families.

¹⁶Yumori, W.C. and Loos, G.P. 1985. "The Perceived Service Needs of Pregnant and Parenting teens and Adults on the Waianae Coast." Working Paper. Kamehameha Schools, p. 16-17.

that economic survival is their most critical need, such is not always the case among those working with them.

Among other needs that girls programs should address include the following: dealing with the physical and sexual abuse in their lives (from parents, boyfriends, pimps, and others), dealing with pregnancy and motherhood, drug and alcohol dependency, confronting family problems, vocational and career counseling, managing stress, and developing a sense of efficacy and empowerment. Many of these needs are universal and should be part of programs for all youth. However, it is my contention that most of these are particularly important for young women.

National efforts to deinstitutionalize status offenders have resulted in significant progress; the last decade, for example, showed a dramatic reduction in girl's incarceration in certain states. There is also more interest in seeking alternatives to incarceration for girls. Programs like therapeutic foster homes, group living situations, homes for teen mothers and their children, and independent living arrangements have proven successful alternatives to locking up troubled and victimized girls.¹⁷ These efforts need to be supported and expanded.

In short, delinquent girls share many problems in common with their male counterparts; they are young, poor, and often members of minority groups. They also have problems, notably child sexual abuse, that are directly linked to their gender. Programs to meet the unique needs of girls are still in short supply in most states, despite the large numbers of girls that could benefit from their services. Stereotypes of youth in trouble as all male have contributed to the neglect of girl's very real problems as well leaving them with few alternatives other than crime. Attention to their situation is long overdue and will make a major contribution to solving female delinquency.

¹⁷For a review of some innovative programs for girls, as well as a more comprehensive review of "what works" in delinquency prevention and intervention programs, see Chapter 10, "Programs for Girls" in Chesney-Lind, M. and Shelden, R. 1992. *Girls, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice*. Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole