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# GIRLS, GANGS, AND VIOLENCE

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### GIRLS GONE WILD?

Although arrest statistics still reflect the dominance of status and other trivial offenses in official female delinquency, the 1990s saw a curious resurgence of interest in girls, often girls of color, engaged in nontraditional, masculine behavior—notably joining gangs, carrying guns, and fighting with other girls. The beginning of the 21st century continued this “bad girl” discourse, with an added focus on white girls’ relational aggression and bullying as an undiscovered, concealed culture.

The increase in the arrests of girls for “other assaults” added fuel to this fire. Since the mid-1980s, arrests of girls for this offense have increased by nearly 200%, and by 2009, more than one out of three juveniles arrested for “other assaults” was female (FBI, 2010a). What is going on? Are we seeing a major shift in the behavior of girls and an entry of girls into violent behaviors, including gang violence, that were once the nearly exclusive domain of young boys? As we shall see, this is the conclusion one would draw from the papers and television, but a closer look at the trends presents a more complex view.

### THE MEDIA, GIRLS OF COLOR, AND GANGS

Fascination with a “new,” violent female offender is not really new. In the 1970s, a notion emerged that the women’s movement had “caused” a surge in women’s serious crimes, but this discussion focused primarily on an imagined

increase in crimes of adult women, usually white women (Chesney-Lind, 1986). The current discussion has settled on girls' commission of violent crimes. Indeed, there has been a veritable siege of news stories and online video postings with essentially the same theme: Girls are getting more violent, girls are in gangs, and their behavior in these gangs does not fit the traditional stereotype of female delinquency.

On August 2, 1993, for example, in a feature spread on teen violence, *Newsweek* printed a box titled "Girls Will Be Girls" that noted, "Some girls now carry guns. Others hide razor blades in their mouths" (Leslie, Biddle, Rosenberg, & Wayne, 1993, p. 44). Explaining this trend, the article notes that "the plague of teen violence is an equal-opportunity scourge. Crime by girls is on the rise, or so various jurisdictions report" (p. 44). Exactly a year earlier, a short-subject broadcast appeared on a CBS program titled *Street Stories*. "Girls in the Hood," which was a rebroadcast of a story that first appeared in January 1992, opened with this voiceover:

Some of the politicians like to call this the Year of the Woman. The women you are about to meet probably aren't what they had in mind. These women are active, they're independent, and they're exercising power in a field dominated by men. In January Harold Dowe first took us to the streets of Los Angeles to meet two uncommon women who are members of street gangs. (CBS, 1992)

The beginning of the 21st century did not see an end to the panic of girls in gangs. In June 2001, ABC reported that while nationally, gang membership was down in the United States, the Justice Department was alarmed about a growing problem: girl gang membership. ABC maintained that girls are "catching up with boys in this one area," "joining gangs for the same reasons as boys," and "doing the same activities as boys: selling drugs and committing murder." The same story that opened with a proclamation of how gang membership was on the decline—as low as 20% in some areas—closed with a fear that the drug-selling, violent gang member—*girl* gang member—is "everywhere" (Gibbs, 2001).

Well into the century's first decade, such stories continued. On May 16, 2006, the *Toronto Star* reported that although no all-female gangs existed in Toronto and girls only comprised 6% of known gang members, female violence was on the rise as "more and more, girls are becoming involved in youth gangs in Canada—a trend that was virtually unheard of just five years ago" (*Toronto Star*, 2006). On August 3, 2008, *The Independent* lamented in an editorial, "Sugar and Spice . . . Why Have Our Little Girls Turned Sour?" (Street-Porter, 2008).

And on August 25, 2010, the *Las Vegas Review Journal* reported that “ten members of an all-female gang were arrested on robbery and burglary charges” (Blasky, 2010). Admitting that the young women mostly stole shoes and clothes and that no one was seriously hurt, the article nonetheless pointed out that attempted murder charges were expected against at least one of the women.

These stories are only a few examples of the many media accounts that have appeared since the second wave of the hypothesis that women’s struggle for equality results in unintended consequences, such as the dramatic increase in girls’ violent activities. Where did this come from? Perhaps the start was an article titled “You’ve Come a Long Way, Moll,” which appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* January 25, 1990. This article noted that “between 1978–1988 the number of women arrested for violent crimes went up 41.5%, vs. 23.1% for men. The trend is even starker for teenagers” (Crittenden, 1990, p. A14). The trend was accelerated by the identification of a new, specific version of the liberation hypothesis. “For Gold Earrings and Protection, More Girls Take the Road to Violence,” announced the front page of the *New York Times*, in an article that opened as follows:

For Aleysha J., the road to crime has been paved with huge gold earrings and name-brand clothes. At Aleysha’s high school in the Bronx, popularity comes from looking the part. Aleysha’s mother has no money to buy her nice things so the diminutive 15 year old steals them, an act that she feels makes her equal parts bad girl and liberated woman. (Lee, 1991, p. A1)

This is followed by the assertion that

there are more and more girls like Aleysha in troubled neighborhoods in the New York metropolitan areas, people who work with children say. There are more girls in gangs, more girls in the drug trade, more girls carrying guns and knives, more girls in trouble. (Lee, 1991, p. A1)

Whatever the original source, at this point, a phenomenon known as “pack journalism” took over. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, for example, ran a story subtitled “Troubled Girls, Troubling Violence” on February 23, 1992, that asserted the following:

Girls are committing more violent crimes than ever before. Girls used to get in trouble like this mostly as accomplices of boys, but that’s no longer true. They don’t need the boys. And their attitudes toward their crimes are often as hard as the weapons they wield—as shown in this account based on

documents and interviews with participants, parents, police and school officials. While boys still account for the vast majority of juvenile crime, girls are starting to catch up. (Santiago, 1992, p. A1)

This particular story featured a single incident in which an African American girl attacked another girl (described as “middle class” and appearing white in the picture that accompanies the story) in a subway. The *Washington Post* ran a similar story titled “Delinquent Girls Achieving a Violent Equality in D.C.” on December 23, 1992 (Lewis, 1992). In March 2006, ABC’s *Good Morning America* contributed to these stories with a series titled “Why Girls Are Getting More Violent: Violence Is on the Rise among High School Girls” (ABC, 2006). One segment was specifically labeled “Girls Are Beating and Bullying.”

In almost all of the stories on this topic, the issue was framed in a similar fashion. Generally, a specific and egregious example of female violence is described. This is then followed by a quick review of the FBI’s arrest statistics, showing what appear to be large increases in the number of girls arrested for violent offenses. Finally, there are quotes from “experts,” usually police officers, teachers, or other social service workers, but occasionally criminologists, interpreting the events.

Following suit, popular talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (November 1992), *Larry King Live* (March 1993), *Ricki Lake Show* (October 1997), *The Maury Show* (November 2008), and *Tyra Banks Show* (February 2009) devoted programs to the subject. Indeed, NBC news broadcast a story on its nightly news that opened with the same link between women’s “equality” and girls’ participation in gangs:

Gone are the days when girls were strictly sidekicks for male gang members, around merely to provide sex and money and run guns and drugs. Now girls also do shooting . . . the new members, often as young as twelve, are the most violent. . . . Ironic as it is, just as women are becoming more powerful in business and government, the same thing is happening in gangs. (NBC, 1993)

For many feminist criminologists, this pattern is more than a little familiar. For example, a 1972 *New York Times* article titled “Crime Rate of Women Up Sharply Over Men’s” noted that “Women are gaining rapidly in at least one traditional area of male supremacy—crime” (Roberts, 1971, p. 1). And in April 2006, *Corrections Today* made similar “equality” claims, stating that the

number of girls in gangs was on the rise in America, and that girls commit crimes, such as robbery and murder, just like their male counterparts (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006, pp. 48–49).

An expanded version of what would come to be known as the emancipation hypothesis appeared in Adler's (1975b) *Sisters in Crime*, in a chapter titled "Minor Girls and Major Crimes":

Girls are involved in more drinking, stealing, gang activity, and fighting—behavior in keeping with their adoption of male roles. We also find increases in the total number of female deviances. The departure from the safety of traditional female roles and the testing of uncertain alternative roles coincide with the turmoil of adolescence creating criminogenic risk factors which are bound to create this increase. These considerations help explain the fact that between 1969 and 1972 national arrests for major crimes show a jump for boys of 82 percent—for girls, 306 percent. (p. 95)

The women's crime wave described by Adler (1975b) and, to a lesser extent, by Simon (1975), was definitively refuted by subsequent research (see Gora, 1982; Steffensmeier & Steffensmeier, 1980), but the popularity of this perspective, at least in the public mind, is apparently undiminished. Whether in the 21st century something different was going on, particularly with reference to girls and gangs and violence, remains to be seen. This chapter now turns to that question.

## TRENDS IN GIRLS' VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION

A review of girls' arrests for violent crime in the past decade (2000–2009, 2005–2009; see Table 3.1) initially seems to provide support for the notion that girls are engaged in more violent crime. Although arrests of girls for murder and aggravated assault were both down since 2000, robbery rose 30.2% for girls, along with a slight increase in the "other assault" category (FBI, 2010a, p. 239). Note too that while recent years have shown some decrease in girls' arrests for these violent offenses, those decreases are far smaller than the decreases seen in the arrests of boys for these same offenses. Changes in arrest rates, which adjust for changes in the population of girls in certain time periods, show much the same pattern.

These increases certainly sound notable, but they are considerably less dramatic on closer inspection. First, if we compare both 10-year and 5-year

**Table 3.1** Percent Change in Male and Female Juvenile Arrests for Violent Crimes

<i>Offense Charged</i>	<i>Males</i>		<i>Females</i>	
	<i>2000–2009 % Change</i>	<i>2005–2009 % Change</i>	<i>2000–2009 % Change</i>	<i>2005–2009 % Change</i>
<i>Index Offenses:</i>				
Murder	+4.0	–1.2	–33.8	–36.4
Forcible rape	–32.4	–20.5	+27.3	–32.1
Robbery	+16.7	+7.7	+30.2	+13.6
Aggravated assault	–28.1	–21.3	–24.4	–19.6
Total violent crime	–14.5	–11.1	–18.2	–10.6
<i>Other Violent Offenses:</i>				
Other assaults	–10.2	–14.4	+5.7	–10.6
Offenses against the family	–43.8	–18.2	–43.2	–27.8

SOURCE: Federal Bureau of Investigation (2010b, pp. 239, 241).

trends in arrests (Table 3.1), we can see that most violent Index offenses<sup>1</sup> for girls have decreased in the past 5 and 10 years. Additionally, “other assaults” decreased since 2005 (by –10.6%), and offenses against the family have actually” decreased as well since 2000 (–43.2%) and 2005 (–27.8%). If girls were becoming increasingly more aggressive, then violent crime arrests overall should have escalated. Indeed, the opposite is true, with most offenses only marginally increasing in the past several years or declining altogether.

Second, what is important to note is that although boys’ violent crime has gone down in the past 10 and 5 years (with some exceptions), boys constitute 92% of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter arrests, 90% of robbery arrests, and 76% of aggravated assaults. Serious crimes of violence are a very small proportion of all girls’ delinquency, and that figure has remained essentially unchanged historically; violent crime is overwhelmingly a male enterprise. Additionally, if we compare the overall violent crime arrests since 2000 for both boys and girls, we find that increases and decreases in girls’ arrests more or less parallel fluctuations with boys’ arrests. Patterns, then, reflect general changes in youth behavior rather than dramatic changes and shifts in only girls’ behavior.

<sup>1</sup>Index offenses are defined by the FBI as murder, forcible rape, robbery, burglary, aggravated assault, larceny theft, auto theft, and arson (added in 1979).

## GIRLS, ROBBERY, AND “OTHER” ASSAULTS

What remains to be explained, then, is the increase in girls’ “other assaults” and robbery arrests. Relabeling and “up-criming” behaviors that were once categorized as status offenses into violent offenses cannot be ruled out as a cause for higher assault arrests statistics (Steffensmeier et al., 2005). For example, a review of the more than 2,000 cases of girls referred to Maryland’s juvenile justice system for “person-to-person” offenses revealed that almost all of these offenses (97.9%) involved “assault.” A further examination of these records revealed that about half were “family centered” and involved such activities as “a girl hitting her mother and her mother subsequently pressing charges” (Mayer, 1994, p. 1). In earlier decades, such behavior would probably have been labeled “incorrigibility” by parents and police. Other mechanisms for relabeling and up-criming status offenses as criminal offenses include police officers advising parents to block the doorways when their children threaten to run away, and then charging the youth with “assault” when they shove past their parents (R. Shelden, personal communication, 1995). Indeed, Pasko (2006) found in her in-depth case file analysis of 112 female juvenile probationers that if the girl offender pushed or threw a small object at her guardian as she ran from the home, she was more likely to be charged with simple assault rather than a status offense. Arrest for this “person offense” could then result in detention or commitment.

With specific reference to domestic violence involving female juveniles, Buzawa and Hotaling (2006) found that these youth were “often less likely to receive statutorily required police actions,” with authorities often arresting them and minimizing the violence the girls experienced, even if there existed evidence the parents were also perpetrators. As examples, the researchers noted two cases in which daughters were slapped by their mothers and retaliated by slapping or pushing their mothers back. In neither case was the parent arrested. Instead, parents, as the complainants, were treated by the police as the “injured parties,” and the girls were arrested (Buzawa & Hotaling, 2006, p. 29). Indeed, the authors also found that both women and juveniles (particularly daughters), if suspects, were more likely to be arrested. Whether the incident involved adult partners, daters, siblings, or parents and children, the odds of female arrest were always higher.

The relabeling of girls’ arguments with parents from status to assault is a form of “bootstrapping” and has also facilitated the incarceration of girls in detention facilities and training schools—something that would not be possible

if the girl were arrested for noncriminal status offenses. As Feld's analysis (2009) of girls' arrests for person offenses points out, "the incarceration of larger numbers and proportions of girls for simple assaults suggests a process of relabeling other status-like conduct, such as incorrigibility, to obtain access to secure placement facilities" (p. 260).

Pasko and Dwight's research (2010) on girls and school-based assaults confirms similar conclusions. Despite their considerable domestic, community, and emotional stressors and troubled conditions, girls in their study reported quite a bit of resistance to fighting. Of the girls arrested for an on-campus assault, only 23% had engaged in a physical fight. The remaining 10 had been arrested for throwing a pencil at a student, throwing a pencil at a teacher, throwing a lit cigarette at a security officer, throwing a book at a student, hitting a student with a locker door, and shoving a student. For those who were arrested, several sought out mediation before their assaultive exchanges. Rarely did girls in her study report spontaneous and unpremeditated fighting. If they fought, an extended history of conflict was present. They often reported seeking help from school counselors, informing teachers, or being caught in a verbal battle when problems with other peers were eminent. Such help was infrequently fruitful. One girl noted:

I got into it with this girl who kept texting (rumors) about me and we got into it in class so the teacher sent us to the principal's office and when we both tried to explain our sides, he got tired of us and told us it was over, he was done with it, and told us to stop and leave. So we did, but it didn't stop and then the next week, she grabbed my hair in the bathroom and cut it, so I hit her and now I'm here (court-ordered program). But they knew about it. They didn't care. It's like, just catch 'em fighting so we can get kicked out.

—Latina, age 15, on probation for assault

Pasko and Dwight's research demonstrates how the school response to girls' aggressive altercations may be partially responsible for the increase in girls' arrests for assault. Pasko and Dwight's research also reveals a school system that is hyperreactive to physical aggression, that applies zero-tolerance policies, and that outsources the matters to an external body (juvenile justice system). However, schools also seemed underreactive in taking girls' reports of conflicts seriously.

Similar findings can be reached when looking at girls and robbery. A 1998 Honolulu study of robbery arrests for girls suggests that no major shift in the



pattern of juvenile robbery occurred over the period 1991 to 1997, which, like other jurisdictions, had seen the number of girls arrested for robbery increase substantially (Chesney-Lind & Paramore, 1998). Rather, it appears that less serious offenses, particularly those committed by girls, were being swept up into the system. Consistent with this explanation were the following observable patterns: The age of offenders shifted downward, the value of items taken decreased, weapons used were less likely to be lethal in nature, and as a result, fewer injuries to the victims occurred. Most significantly, the proportion of adult victims declined sharply while the number of juvenile victims increased. In short, the study suggested that the problem of female juvenile robbery in the City and County of Honolulu was largely characterized by slightly older youth bullying and “hi-jacking” younger youth for small amounts of cash and, occasionally, jewelry—incidents that had previously been handled informally or formally within the confines of the school system, not law enforcement.

Finally, Steffensmeier and Schwartz’s (2009) examination of girls and violence also confirms that girls are not narrowing the gender gap in robbery offenses. Using a time-series analysis to determine whether the gender gap in juvenile arrest trends has been converging, diverging, or essentially stable/trendless (no change) from 1980 to 2003, they found that no significant change had occurred for robbery, rape, and homicide. Furthermore, when the authors examined self-report data to see if notable changes had occurred, their results indicated “marked stability in the gender gap both for composite assault and for robbery” (p. 72).

Other analyses of trends in self-report data of youthful involvement in violent offenses also fail to show the dramatic changes. Specifically, a matched sample of “high-risk” youth (ages 13 to 17) surveyed in the 1977 National Youth Study and the 1989 Denver Youth Survey revealed significant decreases in girls’ involvement in felony assaults, minor assaults, and hard drugs, and no change in a wide range of other delinquent behaviors—including felony theft, minor theft, and index delinquency (D. Huizinga, personal communication, 1994). Additionally, the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) data express similar conclusions. In 1991, 34.3% of girls reported engaging in a physical fight in their lifetimes. This dropped to 23.9% in 2001 and 22.9% in 2009 (YRBSS, 2010).

Although many questions can be raised about the actual significance of differences between official and self-report data, careful analyses of these data shed doubt on the media’s construction of the hyperviolent girl. However,

these data are less helpful in helping us understand girls' involvement with gangs. The reason for this is simple: Changes in official crime statistics and self-report data failed to signal the rise of youth gangs of either gender. As a consequence, it might be more useful to examine other sources of information on gangs and the role of gender in gang membership.

## GIRL GANG MEMBERSHIP

After years of decline, the gang problem in the United States has become more serious. The most recent police estimates put the number of gangs in the United States at 27,000 and the number of gang members at approximately 788,000. This represents a 25% increase in the number of jurisdictions reporting gang problems since the nation recorded a 12-year low in 2001 (National Gang Center, 2009). In 2007, 86% of large cities reported a gang problem; this is up from about 50% in 1983 when the gang problem in our country was just beginning to grow (Curry, Fox, Ball, & Stone, 1992; National Gang Center, 2009). But what is the role of gender in gang membership?

Are there girls in gangs? If so, how many and how does gender work in the gang environment? Let's start with some estimates of the number of girls in gangs. Despite their image as prototypically male, there are girls in gangs, and they are there in pretty substantial numbers. However, the gendered habits of both practitioners and researchers long rendered the girls "present but invisible" until the last few decades (McRobbie & Garber, 1975).

Asking the youth themselves if they have ever been in a gang (self-report) indicates that in 2006, 3% of boys (aged 12–16) and 1% of girls reported they were in a gang (Green & Pranis, 2007, p. 36); this would mean that girls are roughly one quarter of all the youth in gangs. Another national self-report study conducted a bit earlier (2001) found that girls were a third of those youth reporting "belonging to a gang" (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006, p. 70). A study done in England and Wales, with a looser definition of "gang," found that girls were roughly half of those classified as belonging to a "delinquent youth group" (Sharp, Aldridge, & Medina, 2006, p. 3). By contrast, police estimates of the number of girls in gangs are frequently very low (often considerably less than 10%; Curry, Ball, & Fox, 1994; National Gang Center, 2009). Studies of gang problems done by researchers in the field tend to line up with the self-report data and find that girls are roughly 20 to 46% of those in gangs (Miller, 2002).

One explanation for the different estimates of the number of girls in gangs is a function of the age of the sample being surveyed, since girls tend to join gangs at a younger age, and they tend to leave gangs earlier than boys (Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen, 2001; Williams, Curry, & Cohen, 2002). A study done of youth ages 11 to 15 found that nearly half the gang members were girls, but one surveying an older group (13–19) found only a fifth were girls (Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993). In the sample of young people drawn to evaluate the antigang program GREAT, girls were 38% of those reporting gang membership in the eighth-grade sample (Esbensen, Deschanes, & Winfree, 1999). This means that in addition to focusing on girls when seeking to prevent girls joining gangs, we especially need to focus on the “tweens” when crafting prevention strategies. One researcher noted that this is about the same age as girls are attracted to scouting (Quicker, 1994).

That said, it is important to remember that gang youth might not be more delinquent than nongang delinquents. One Hawaii study found women and girls labeled by police as gang members committed fewer total numbers of most offenses than men and committed fewer serious offenses. Indeed, the offense profile for the females in the gang sample bears a very close relationship to typical female delinquency. More than a third of the “most serious” arrests of girls (38.1%) were property offenses (larceny theft). This offense category was followed by status offenses (19%) and drug offenses (9.5%). For boys, the most serious offense was likely to be “other assaults” (27%), followed by larceny theft (14%). This profile indicated that although both the boys and girls in this sample of suspected gang members were chronic but not serious offenders, this was particularly true of the girls (see Chesney-Lind, Rockhill, Marker, & Reyes, 1994).

These patterns prompted further exploration of the degree to which young women labeled by police as “suspected gang members” differed from young women who had been arrested for delinquency. To carry out this exploration, a comparison group was created for those in the Oahu sample who were legally juveniles. Youth suspected of gang membership were matched on ethnicity, age, and gender with youth who were in the juvenile arrest database but who had not been labeled as gang members. A look at offense patterns of this smaller group indicates no major differences between girls suspected of gang membership and their nongang counterparts. The most serious offense for gang girls was status offenses, and for nongang girls it was other assaults (Chesney-Lind, 1993, p. 338).

This finding is not totally unexpected. Similar studies, comparing groups in Arizona with Hispanic gangs (Zatz, 1985) and in Las Vegas with African American and Hispanic gangs (Shelden, Snodgrass, & Snodgrass, 1993), although not focusing on gender, found little to differentiate gang members from other “delinquent” or criminal youth. Accordingly, the 1997 National Longitudinal Youth Survey found that the contribution of active gang members to overall delinquency may only be 20% (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Bowker and Klein (1983), in an examination of data on girls in gangs in Los Angeles in the 1960s, compared the etiology of delinquent behavior of gang girls and their nongang counterparts and asserted the following:

We conclude that the overwhelming impact of racism, sexism, poverty and limited opportunity structures is likely to be so important in determining the gang membership and juvenile delinquency of women and girls in urban ghettos that personality variables, relations with parents and problems associated with heterosexual behavior play a relatively minor role in determining gang membership and juvenile delinquency. (pp. 750–751)

Recent studies of girls in gangs reveal that for girls as well as boys, gang membership increases delinquent behavior. Gangs clearly increase girls’ involvement in serious delinquency when compared to nongang girls drawn from similar neighborhoods. Relative to young women who are not in a gang, young women in gangs reported higher levels of ever carrying concealed weapons (79% compared to 30%), ever being in a gang fight (90% compared to 9%), and ever “attacked someone with a weapon to cause serious injury” (69% compared to 28%). Gang-involved girls are also far more likely to both sell and use illegal drugs than nongang girls (with 56% having sold crack cocaine compared to only 7% of nongang girls; Miller, 2002, 85; see also Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999).

However, gang girls’ involvement in the most serious of gang crimes still remained nominal. Deschenes and Esbensen (1999) found that gang membership did increase girls’ chances of experiencing violence (as both victims and offenders) but that the frequency of violence used by gang girls was overall relatively low. Girl gang members reported committing robberies or shooting a firearm an average of only once a year and assaulting someone with a weapon twice a year (p. 286). Moore and Hagedorn’s (2001) examination of Chicago arrest records from 1993 to 1996 revealed similar

findings: Only 0.1% and 2.8% of female juvenile arrestees were arrested on homicide and weapons charges, respectively (p. 5).

These quantitative data do not provide support for the rise of a “new” violent female offender and suggest that the hype surrounding the issue has more to do with racism than with crime. Focus on girls in gangs, like its early counterpart, did have one positive effect; it brought much-needed attention to the lives of girls of color. There have been a small but growing number of excellent ethnographic studies of girls in gangs that suggest a much more complex picture wherein some girls solve their problems of gender, race, and class through gang membership. As we review these studies, it will become clear that girls’ experiences with gangs cannot simply be characterized as “breaking into” a male world. Girls and women have always been engaged in more violent behavior than the stereotype of women supports; girls have also been in gangs for decades. However, their participation in these gangs, even their violence, is heavily influenced by their gender.

## GIRLS AND GANGS: QUALITATIVE STUDIES

Given the range of estimates of girls’ involvement with gangs, one might wonder whether girls’ involvement with gang life resembles the involvement of girls in other youth subcultures, where they have been described as “present but invisible” (McRobbie & Garber, 1975). The longstanding “gendered habits” of researchers have meant that girls’ involvement with gangs has been neglected, sexualized, and oversimplified.<sup>2</sup> So, although there have been a growing number of studies investigating the connections among male gangs, violence, and other criminal activities, there has been no parallel development in research on female involvement in gang activity. As with all young women who find their way into the juvenile justice system, girls in gangs have been invisible.

As noted earlier, this pattern of invisibility was undoubtedly set by the initial efforts to understand visible lower-class, male delinquency in Chicago more than half a century ago. As an example, Jankowski’s (1991) highly

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<sup>2</sup>For exceptions, see Bowker and Klein (1983), Brown (1977), Campbell (1984, 1990), Fishman (1995), Giordano, Cernkovich, and Pugh (1978), Harris (1988), Moore (1991), Ostner (1986), and Quicker (1983).

regarded *Islands in the Streets* implicitly conceptualizes gangs as a distinctly male phenomenon, and girls are discussed, as noted earlier, in the context of male property:

In every gang I studied, women were considered a form of property. Interestingly, the women I observed and interviewed told me they felt completely comfortable with certain aspects of this relationship and simply resigned themselves to accepting those aspects they dislike. The one aspect they felt most comfortable with was being treated like servants, charged with the duty of providing men with whatever they wanted. (p. 146)

Taylor's (1993) work, *Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs*, does focus on girls, but from a distinctly masculine perspective. His work, like Thrasher's and Jankowski's, tends to minimize and distort the motivations and roles of female gang members and is the result of the gender bias of male gang researchers, who describe the female experience from the male gang members' or their own viewpoint (Campbell, 1990). Typically, male gang researchers have characterized female members as maladjusted tomboys or sexual chattel who, in either case, are no more than mere appendages to the male members of the gang.

Taylor's (1993) study provides a veneer of academic support for the media's definition of the girl gang member as a junior version of the liberated female crook of the 1970s. Exactly how many girls and women he interviewed for his book is not clear, but the introduction clearly sets the tone for his work: "We have found that females are just as capable as males of being ruthless in so far as their life opportunities are presented. This study indicates that females have moved beyond the status quo of gender repression" (p. 8). His work stresses the similarities between boys' and girls' involvement in gangs, despite the fact that when the girls and women he interviews speak, it is clear that this view is oversimplified. Listen, for example, to Pat responding to a question about "problems facing girls in gangs":

If you got a all girls crew, um, they think you're "soft" and in the streets if you soft, it's all over. Fellas think girls is soft, like Rob, he think he got it better in his sh\*t 'cause he's a fella, a man. It's wild, but fellas really hate seeing girls getting off. Now, some fellas respect the power of girls, but most just want us in the sack. (Taylor, 1993, p. 118)

Other studies of female gang delinquency stress that girls have auxiliary roles in boys' gangs (see Bowker, 1978; Brown, 1977; Bullock & Tilley, 2002;

Flowers, 1987; Hanson, 1964; Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Lauderdale & Burman, 2009; Miller, 1975, 1980; Rice, 1963). Overall, these studies portray girls who are part of gangs as either girlfriends of the male members or “little sister” subgroups of the male gang (Bowker, p. 184; Hanson, 1964). Furthermore, they suggest that the role girls play in gangs is “to conceal and carry weapons for the boys, to provide sexual favors, and sometimes to fight against girls who were connected with enemy boys’ gangs” (Mann, 1984, p. 45).

Some firsthand accounts of girl gangs, although not completely challenging this image, focus more directly on the race and class issues confronting these girls. Quicker’s (1983) study of Chicana gang members in East Los Angeles found that these girls, although still somewhat dependent on their male counterparts, were becoming more independent. These girls identified themselves as “homegirls” and their male counterparts as “homeboys,” a common reference to relationships in the barrio. In an obvious reference to “strain theory,” Quicker notes that there are few economic opportunities within the barrio to meet the needs of the family unit. As a result, families are disintegrating and cannot provide access to culturally emphasized success goals for young people about to enter adulthood. Not surprisingly, almost all their activities occur within the context of gang life, where they learn how to get along in the world and are insulated within the harsh environment of the barrio (Quicker, 1983).

Moore’s (1991) ethnography of two Chicano gangs in East Los Angeles, initiated during the same period as Quicker’s (1983), brought the work into the present. Her interviews establish both the multifaceted nature of girls’ experiences with gangs in the barrio and the variations in male gang members’ perceptions of girls in gangs. Notably, her study establishes that there is no one type of gang girl, with some of the girls in gangs, even in the 1940s, “not tightly bound to boy’s cliques” and “much less bound to particular barrios than boys” (p. 27). All the girls in gangs tended to come from a “more troubled background than those of the boys” (p. 30). Significant problems with sexual victimization haunt girls but not boys. Moore documents that the sexual double standard characterized male gang members’ and the neighborhood’s negative view of girls in gangs (see also Moore & Hagedorn, 1995). Girl gang members were called “tramps” and “no good,” despite the girls’ vigorous rejection of these labels. Furthermore, some male gang members, even those who had relationships with girl gang members, felt that “square girls were their future” (Moore & Hagedorn, p. 75).

Harris’s (1988) study of the Cholas, a Latina gang in the San Fernando Valley, echoes this theme. Although the Cholas resemble male gangs in many

respects, the gang challenged girls' traditional destiny within the barrio in two direct ways. First, the girls rejected the traditional image of the Latina woman as "wife and mother," supporting instead a more "macho" homegirl role. Second, the gang supported the girls in their estrangement from organized religion, substituting instead a form of familialism that "provides a strong substitute for weak family and conventional school ties" (p. 172).

The same "macho themes" emerged in a study of the female "age sets" found in a large gang in Phoenix, Arizona (Moore, Vigil, & Levy, 1995). In these groups, fighting is used by girls and boys to achieve status and recognition. Even here, though, the violence is mediated by gender and culture. One girl recounts how she established her reputation by "protecting one of my girls. He [a male acquaintance] was slapping her around and he was hitting her and kicking her, and I went and jumped him and started hitting him" (p. 39). Once respect is earned, these researchers found that girls relied on their reputations and fought less.

Girls in these sets also had to negotiate a Mexican American culture that is "particularly conservative with regard to female sexuality" (Moore et al., 1995, p. 29). In their neighborhoods and in their relations with the boys in the gang, the persistence of the double standard places the more assertive and sexually active girls in an anomalous position. They must contend with a culture that venerates "pure girls" while also setting the groundwork for the sexual exploitation of girls by gang boys. One of their respondents reports that the boys sometimes try to get girls high and "pull a train" (where a number of boys have sex with one girl), something she clearly objects to, although she admits to having had sex with a boy she didn't like after the male gang members "got me drunk" (p. 32).

Further description of the sexual victimization of girls and women involved in Chicano gangs is supplied by Portillos and Zatz (1995) in their ethnography of Phoenix gangs. They noted that girls can enter gangs either by being "jumped in" or "trained in," the former involving being beaten into the gang and the latter involving having sex with a string of male gang members. Often, those who are "trained in" are later regarded as "loose" and "not really" a gang member. Portillos and Zatz also found extremely high levels of some type of family abuse among the girls they interviewed, which caused them to conclude that "her treatment by male gang members may simply replicate how she is typically treated by males" (p. 24).

Work by Cepeda and Valdez, who conducted interviews with gang-involved Latino youth (2003), adds importantly to notions of "good" and "bad"



girls in the gang context. They found that male gang members tended to view Latinas in very particular ways, and that the “partying” involved with the two different groups put one group of girls particularly at risk. Girls with whom the boys had an “emotional” relationship, sometimes a live-in relationship, were invited to family parties and generally regarded as respectable (p. 96). “Hoodrats,” by contrast, were perceived as “loose” and sexually available, even if they were members of the gang. Partying with one’s girlfriend often meant family gatherings, with relatively little risk to young women; but the spontaneous parties with hoodrats often involve excessive drug use and drinking and can include sexual assault of “wasted” girls (Cepeda & Valdez, 2003, p. 98).

Fishman (1995) studied the Vice Queens, an African American female auxiliary gang to a boys’ gang, the Vice Kings, that existed in Chicago during the early 1960s. Living in a mostly black community characterized by poverty, unemployment, deterioration, and a high crime rate, the gang of about 30 teenage girls was loosely knit (unlike the male gang) and provided each other with companionship and friends. Failing in school and unable to find work, the girls spent the bulk of their time “hanging out” on the streets with the Vice Kings, which usually included the consumption of alcohol, sexual activities, and occasional delinquency. Most of their delinquency was “traditionally female,” such as prostitution, shoplifting, and running away, but some was more serious (e.g., auto theft). They also engaged in fights with other groups of girls, largely to protect their gang’s reputation for toughness.

Growing up in rough neighborhoods provided the Vice Queens “with opportunities to learn such traditional male skills as fighting and taking care of themselves on the streets” (Fishman, 1995, p. 87). The girls were expected to learn to defend themselves against “abusive men” and “attacks on their integrity” (p. 87). Their relationship with the Vice Kings was primarily sexual, as sexual partners and mothers of their children, but with no hope of marriage. Fishman perceptively points out that the Vice Queens were

socialized to be independent, assertive and to take risks with the expectations that these are characteristics that they will need to function effectively within the black low income community. . . . As a consequence, black girls demonstrate, out of necessity, a greater flexibility in roles. (p. 90)

There has been little improvement in the economic situation of the African American community since the 1960s, and today’s young women undoubtedly face an even bleaker future than the Vice Queens. In this context, Fishman

speculates that “black female gangs today have become more entrenched, more violent, and more oriented to ‘male’ crime” (p. 91). These changes, she adds, are unrelated to the women’s movement but are instead the “forced ‘emancipation’ which stems from the economic crisis within the black community” (p. 90).

The gender oppression and structural limitations faced by girls in contemporary poverty-stricken neighborhoods have been largely confirmed by current research by Miller (2001) on girl gang members in Columbus and St. Louis—both relatively new gang cities. With the majority of her gang interviewees African American, Miller found that the segregated and economically devastated neighborhood environments—which consequently led girls to growing up around crime and gang activity—were influential determinants in whether girls joined gangs. Additionally, girl gang members reported that problems within the family, such as drug abuse, violence, and sexual victimization, led them to avoid home and join a gang (p. 35). Experiencing gender as both a protective and a risk factor, the girls in Miller’s study found gang life empowering as well as victimizing in some ways; they negotiated and strategized gender devaluation within their gangs and social inequality and dangers in their communities. Miller found that girls in gangs not only performed more delinquency and violence, but “it’s also the case that gang involvement itself opens up young women to additional victimization risk and exposes them to violence, even when they are not the direct victims, that is sometimes haunting and traumatic in its own right” (p. 151).

Hunt and Joe-Laidler (2001) confirm such findings of victimization and violence in their study of ethnic youth gangs in the San Francisco Bay area. The researchers conclude that “girl gang members experience an extensive amount of violence in their lives whether on the streets, in their family lives, or in their relationships with lovers and boyfriends” (p. 381). Although violence does not consume their everyday lives, girls in gangs do sometimes experience roles of victims (by both men and their own homegirls), perpetrators of, and witnesses to violence. Moreover, these experiences with violence stem from violence-prone situations and life in tension-filled, occasionally hostile neighborhoods, and not the “demonic character” of gang girls themselves (p. 366).

Furthering investigation into gang girls’ lives and pathways into and out of the gang, Moloney Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and MacKenzie’s (2011) study of 65 parenting/pregnant female gang members and their transition to motherhood found that girls had difficulty negotiating their identities as young mothers and gang girls—both stigmatized identities. While motherhood meant retreat from

the street, girls in their study still struggled with issues of respect, respectability, and financial and economic resources. Gang life meant more autonomy for them—an aspect of their lives they craved and often did not receive as mothers (Moloney et al., 2011).

Dorais and Corriveau (2009) research also shows the complexity and negotiations gang girls face in terms of sexuality, sexual activity, and victimization. Focusing on the culture of machismo that leads gang boys to controlling prostitution rings, Dorais and Corriveau show how such street gangs maintain and perpetuate the sexual trafficking of underage girls. The authors first document how young girls become romantically involved with and attached to gang members through emotional, psychological, and financial manipulation and then eventually are sold into prostitution. Dorais and Corriveau demonstrate how techniques, such as “love bombing (showering girls with affection and gifts), are employed by gang members to initially bring young women into the fold, and how such techniques can make it difficult for women to withdraw and leave” (p. 45).

The effects of race and gender, coupled with growing up in economically and socially deprived violent areas, are further illuminated in work by Lauderback, Hansen, and Waldorf (1992) in their study of African American female gangs in San Francisco and by Moore and Hagedorn (1995) in their exploration of ethnic differences between African American and Hispanic female gang members in Milwaukee. Disputing the traditional notions of female gang members as “maladjusted, violent tomboys” and sex objects completely dependent on the favor of male gang members, Lauderback and colleagues studied an independent girl gang that engaged in crack sales and organized “boosting” to support themselves and their young children (p. 57). All under 25, abandoned by the fathers of their children, abused and controlled by other men, these young women wanted to be “doing something other than selling drugs and to leave the neighborhood,” but “many felt that the circumstances which led them to sell drugs were not going to change” (Lauderback et al., p. 69). Enhancing these research findings, Moore and Hagedorn found that when they asked their interviewees if they agreed with the statement, “The way men are today, I’d rather raise my kids myself,” 75% of the African American female gang members agreed, compared to only 43% of the Latina gang members. By contrast, 29% of Latinas but none of the African American women agreed that “all a woman needs to straighten out her life is to find a good man” (Moore & Hagedorn, 1995, p. 18).

Campbell's work (1984, 1990) on Hispanic gangs in the New York City area further explores the role of the gang for girls in this culture. The girls in her study joined gangs for reasons that are largely explained by their place in a society that has little to offer young women of color (1990, pp. 172–173). First, the possibility of their obtaining a decent career, outside of “domestic servant,” was practically nonexistent. Many came from female-headed families subsisting on welfare and most had dropped out of school with no marketable skills. Their aspirations for the future were both sex-typed and unrealistic, with girls wanting to be rock stars or professional models. Second, they found themselves in a highly gendered community in which the men in their lives, although not traditional breadwinners, still make many decisions that circumscribe the possibilities open to young women. Third, the responsibilities of young Hispanic mothers further restrict the options available to them. Campbell cites recent data revealing a very bleak future: 94% will have children and 84% will raise their children without a husband. Most will be dependent on some form of welfare (1990, p. 182). Fourth, these young women face a future of isolation as single mothers in the projects. Finally, they share with their male counterparts a future of powerlessness as members of the urban underclass. Their lives, in effect, reflect all the burdens of their triple handicaps of race, class, and gender.

For these girls, Campbell (1990) observes, the gang represents “an idealized collective solution to the bleak future that awaits” them. The girls portray to themselves and the outside world a very idealized and romantic life (p. 173). They develop an exaggerated sense of belonging to the gang. Many were loners prior to joining the gang, only loosely connected to schoolmates and neighborhood peer groups. Yet the gangs' closeness and the excitement of gang life is more fiction than reality. Their daily “street talk” is filled with exaggerated stories of parties, drugs, alcohol, and other varieties of “fun.” However, as Campbell notes,

These events stand as a bulwark against the loneliness and drudgery of their future lives. They also belie the day to day reality of gang life. The lack of recreational opportunities, the long days unfilled by work or school and the absence of money mean that the hours and days are whiled away on street corners. “Doing nothing” means hang out on the stoop; the hours of “bull\*\*\*\*” punctuated by trips to the store to buy one can of beer at a time. When an unexpected windfall arrives, marijuana and rum are purchased in bulk and the partying begins. The next day, life returns to normal. (1990, p. 176)

Joe and Chesney-Lind's (1995) interviews with youth gang members in Hawaii further describe the social role of the gang. Everyday life in marginalized and chaotic neighborhoods sets the stage for group solidarity in two distinct ways. First, the boredom, lack of resources, and high visibility of crime in their neglected communities create the conditions for youth to turn to others who are similarly situated. The group offers a social outlet. At another level, the stress on the family from living in marginalized areas, combined with financial struggles, creates heated tension and, in many cases, violence in the home. Joe and Chesney-Lind found, like Moore, high levels of sexual and physical abuse in the girls' lives: 62% of the girls had been either sexually abused or assaulted. Three fourths of the girls and more than half of the boys reported suffering physical abuse.

The group provides both girls and boys with a safe refuge and a surrogate family. Although the theme of marginality cuts across gender and ethnicity, there were critical differences in how girls and boys, and Samoans, Filipinos, and Hawaiians, express and respond to the problems of everyday life. For example, there are differences in boys' and girls' strategies for coping with these pressures—particularly the boredom of poverty. For boys, fighting—even looking for fights—is a major activity within the gang. If anything, the presence of girls around gang members depresses violence. As one 14-year-old Filipino put it, “If we not with the girls, we fighting. If we not fighting, we with the girls” (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995, p. 424). Many of the boys' activities involved drinking, cruising, and looking for trouble. This “looking for trouble” also meant being prepared for trouble. Although guns are somewhat available, most of the boys interviewed used bats or their hands to fight, largely but not exclusively because of cultural norms that suggest that fighting with guns is for the weak.

For girls, fighting and violence are part of their lives in the gang but not something they necessarily seek out. Instead, protection from neighborhood and family violence was a consistent and major theme in the girls' interviews. One girl simply stated that she belongs to the gang to provide “some protection from her father” (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995, p. 425). Through the group she has learned ways to defend herself physically and emotionally: “He used to beat me up, but now I hit back and he doesn't beat me much now.” Another 14-year-old Samoan put it, “You gotta be part of the gang or else you're the one who's gonna get beat up.” Although this young woman said that members of her gang had to “have total attitude and can fight,” she went on to say, “We

want to be a friendly gang. I don't know why people are afraid of us. We're not that violent." Fights do come up in these girls' lives: "We only wen mob this girl 'cause she was getting wise, she was saying 'what, slut' so I wen crack her and all my friends wen jump in" (Joe & Chesney-Lind, pp. 425–426).

Gangs also produce opportunities for involvement in criminal activity, but these are affected by gender as well. Especially for boys from poor families, stealing and small-time drug dealing make up for their lack of money. These activities are not nearly as common among the female respondents. Instead, their problems with the law originate with more traditional forms of female delinquency, such as running away from home. Their families still attempt to hold them to a double standard that results in tensions and disputes with parents that have no parallel among the boys.

### LABELING GIRLS VIOLENT?

Historically, those activities that did not fit the official stereotype of "girls' delinquency" have been ignored by authorities (Fishman, 1995; Quicker, 1983; Shacklady-Smith, 1978). Taken together, assessments of gang delinquency in girls, whether quantitative or qualitative, suggest there is little evidence to support the notion of a new, violent female offender. A close reading of ethnographies of gang girls indicates that girls have often been involved in violent behavior as a part of gang life. During earlier periods, however, this occasional violence was ignored by law enforcement officers, who were far more concerned with girls' sexual behavior or morality.

As noted earlier, traditional schools of criminology have assumed that male delinquency, even in its most violent forms, was somehow an understandable if not "normal" response to their situations. This same assumption is not, however, extended to girls who live in violent neighborhoods. If they engage in even minor violence, they are perceived as being more vicious than their male counterparts. In this fashion, the construction of an artificial, passive femininity lays the foundation for the demonization of young girls of color, as shown by the media treatment of girl gang members. Media portrayal of girls and gangs creates a political climate in which the victims of racism and sexism can be blamed for their own problems (Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999). This demonization can then be used as justification for inattention to these marginalized girls' genuine problems or their harsh treatment in the juvenile justice system.

At best, these ethnographic accounts suggest that girls in gangs are doing far more than seeking “equality” with their male counterparts (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). Girls’ involvement in gangs is more than simple rebellion against traditional, white, middle-class notions of girlhood. Girls’ gang membership is shaped by the array of economic, educational, familial, and social conditions and constraints that exist in their families and neighborhoods. Indeed, the very structure of the gang and its social life are dependent upon the myriad ways boys and girls manage and construct their gender.

Curry (1995) argues that the discussion of girls’ involvement with gangs has tended to go to one extreme or the other. Either girls in gangs are portrayed as victims of injury or they are portrayed as “liberated,” degendered gang-bangers. The truth is that both perspectives are partially correct and incomplete without the other. Careful inquiry into the lives of these girls shows the ways in which the gang facilitates survival in their world. In addition, focusing on the social role of the gang in girls’ lives illuminates the ways in which girls’ and boys’ experiences of neighborhood, family, and violence converge and diverge.

### GIRLS, GANGS, AND MEDIA HYPE: A FINAL NOTE

A quick comparison of the articles that appeared in each surge of media interest in the “crime wave” committed by girls and women shows many similarities. Most important, those who tout these “crime waves” use a crude form of equity feminism to explain the trends observed and, in the process, contribute to the “backlash” against the women’s movement (Faludi, 1991).

There are also crucial differences between the two women’s “crime waves.” In the stories that announced the first crime wave during the 1970s, the “liberated female crook” was a white political activist, a “terrorist,” and a drug-using hippie. For example, one story syndicated by the *New York Times* service included pictures of both Patty Hearst and Friederike Krabbe (Klemesrud, 1978). Today’s demonized woman is often a violent African American or Hispanic teenager.

In both instances, there was some small amount of truth in the articles. As this chapter has shown, girls and women have always engaged in more violent behavior than the stereotype of women supports; girls have also been in gangs for decades. The periodic media rediscovery of these facts, then, must be serving other political purposes.

In the past, the goal may have been to discredit young white women and their invisible but central African American counterparts (Barnett, 1993) who were challenging the racism, sexism, and militarism of that day. Today, as the research on girls and gangs has indicated, young minority youth of both genders face a bleak present and a grim future. Today, it is clear that *gang* has become a code word for race. A review of the media portrayal of girls in gangs suggests that, beyond this, media stories on the youth gang problem can create a political climate in which the victims of racism and sexism are held accountable for their own problems and deserving of punishment.

In short, this most recent women's "crime wave" appears to be a cultural attempt to reframe the problems of racism and sexism in society. As young women are demonized by the media, their genuine problems can be marginalized and ignored. Indeed, the girls have become the problem. The challenge to those concerned about girls is, then, twofold. First, responsible work on girls in gangs must make the dynamics of this victim blaming clear. Second, it must continue to develop an understanding of girls' gangs that is sensitive to the contexts within which they arise. In an era that is increasingly concerned about the intersections of class, race, and gender, such work seems long overdue.