



MAY 2008



Girls Study Group

Understanding and Responding to Girls' Delinquency

J. Robert Flores, Administrator

Violence by Teenage Girls: Trends and Context

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According to data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, from 1991 to 2000, arrests of girls increased more (or decreased less) than arrests of boys for most types of offenses. By 2004, girls accounted for 30 percent of all juvenile arrests. However, questions remain about whether these trends reflect an actual increase in girls' delinquency or changes in societal responses to girls' behavior. To find answers to these questions, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) convened the Girls Study Group to establish a theoretical and empirical foundation to guide the development, testing, and dissemination of strategies to reduce or prevent girls' involvement in delinquency and violence.

The Girls Study Group Series, of which this Bulletin is a part, presents the Group's findings. The series examines issues such as patterns of offending among adolescents and how they differ for girls and boys; risk and protective factors associated with delinquency, including gender differences; and the causes and correlates of girls' delinquency.

In June 2005, *Newsweek* ran a story titled "Bad Girls Go Wild," which described "the significant rise in violent behavior among girls" as a "burgeoning national crisis" (Scelfo, 2005)—a depiction that echoes other recent

media accounts. This Bulletin assesses the accuracy of these assertions using the best available data. Drawing on information from official arrest sources, nationally based self-report and victimization surveys, and studies reported



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in the social science literature, the Bulletin examines the involvement of girls in violent activity (including whether such activity has increased relative to the increase for boys) and the contexts in which girls engage in violent behavior.

One of the most consistent and robust findings in criminology is that, for nearly every offense, females engage in much less crime and juvenile delinquency than males. In recent years, however, the extent and character of this gender difference in offending are increasingly being called into question by statistics and media reports suggesting the increasing involvement of girls in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. During the past two-and-a-half decades, official statistics suggest that female delinquency has undergone substantial changes compared with male delinquency. Between 1980 and 2005, arrests of girls increased nationwide, while arrests of boys decreased (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006). These arrest trends, along with high-profile cases of female delinquency, have become the main support for media headlines.

However, because arrest counts are a product of both delinquent behavior and official responses to it,

researchers and policymakers face a dilemma about how to interpret the arrest statistics. Do the increases in arrests indicate real changes in girls' behaviors, or are the increases a product of recent changes in public sentiment and enforcement policies that have elevated the visibility and reporting of girls' delinquency and violence? This Bulletin attempts to answer this question.

Trends in Girls' Violence

This Bulletin relies on three data sources—official arrest data, self-report data, and victimization data—to examine trends in girls' violence from 1980 through 2005. Each source has strengths and weaknesses and provides a somewhat different picture of crime.

Data Sources

Official sources of data on delinquency include information collected and disseminated by local agencies such as police, as well as State and national organizations that disseminate information collected at the local level. The primary source of official data on delinquency comes from the Federal Bureau of

Violence Defined

Many different sources of data examine violence and girls' involvement in it. However, these sources often rely on different definitions and measures of violence. Official criminal justice system data sources (e.g., Uniform Crime Reports) use legal definitions focusing on homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault (which usually involves assault with a weapon or assault producing injury), and simple assault (a behavior defined differently in various jurisdictions). Self-report studies and those involving interviews with adolescents focus on a variety of behaviors including, for example, fighting and weapon-carrying. Some studies include relational aggression in their definitions of violent behavior (see p. 11 for a discussion of relational aggression). In general, this Bulletin defines violence as behaviors that inflict or threaten to inflict bodily injury on other persons.

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Investigation's (FBI's) Uniform Crime Report (UCR), published annually. Each UCR reflects thousands of local police reports on crimes known to police and on arrests, from which the FBI compiles statistics on the type of crime (roughly 30 broad categories), the location of the arrest (urban, suburban, or rural), and the demographic characteristics of the offender (e.g., age, gender).

Self-report surveys on juvenile crime and its correlates are another major source of information. In addition to the detailed information on respondent characteristics, the main benefit of self-report data is the information obtained on crimes that were committed by youth but not known to the police. Most self-report delinquency surveys are cross-sectional (i.e., cover only one point in time) and localized (i.e., limited to a particular community or region). Among the surveys that provide longitudinal or trend data on youth delinquency for the Nation as a whole, the authors use Monitoring the Future (MTF).¹ MTF is an ongoing study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of American secondary school students. Each year, a total of approximately 50,000 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students are surveyed (12th graders since 1975, and 8th and 10th graders since 1991).

Victimization surveys provide a third important source of information on delinquent behavior. These types of data provide a different perspective. Whereas information on self-reported delinquent activity is collected from the offender, the source of information for victimization surveys is the victim of criminal activity. The Census Bureau has conducted the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) for the Bureau of Justice Statistics annually since 1973. Each year, NCVS interviews individuals

age 12 and older in a nationally representative sample of approximately 50,000 households. Victims of various types of crimes (including violent and property crimes) report detailed characteristics of criminal events,

including time and location, level of physical and property damage, and—in the case of violent crime—the perceived characteristics (e.g., age, gender, race) of the offender(s).

Primary Data Sources

- Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) arrest data.
- Monitoring the Future (MTF).
- National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).

Trends in Arrests for Violent Offenses: UCR Data

In 2005, out of 14 million arrests, 2.1 million involved juveniles (Snyder, forthcoming).² Juveniles comprised about 15 percent of arrests for all offenses, about 16 percent of arrests for Violent Crime Index³ offenses, and about 26 percent of arrests for

Limitations

All three data sources have limitations. The official or arrest data capture only detected offenses—those that are known to the police or that result in an arrest. Reporting police agencies also vary widely in their reporting coverage. Some jurisdictions have 100-percent reporting, while other jurisdictions are underrepresented. Moreover, because offense categories are very broad, conclusions may be misleading.* For example, the increase in girls' arrests for "serious crimes" (i.e., UCR Index Crimes, as discussed and defined later in this Bulletin) is largely attributable to the inclusion of larceny-theft in that category. Furthermore, arrest data may be affected by changes in enforcement policy that may affect one gender more than the other. Given the gender difference in the character and context of delinquency (i.e., that girls generally engage in less serious forms of crime), changes in laws and enforcement toward targeting less serious forms of lawbreaking may disproportionately impact the risk of arrest for females.

Limitations of self-report and victimization data are that they typically cover only a few forms of lawbreaking and have sampling deficiencies (e.g., MTF is administered in schools and so would underreport crimes committed by youth who have dropped out of school or are frequently truant, and NCVS only interviews victims who are age 12 and older). These data are, however, particularly useful for thinking about whether girls' delinquency trends reflect changes in underlying behavior or changes in enforcement and arrest policies—at least when data sources overlap for the forms of law-violating behavior being measured. For example, longitudinal arrest data on assault can be compared with information on assaults collected in self-report and victimization surveys over time. Confidence in recent assertions regarding levels of violence among girls is enhanced if all of these sources agree on the nature of the trends, whereas confidence is diminished if the sources disagree.

*Reporting agencies classify each arrest by the most serious offense charged in that arrest. If a juvenile is arrested for an aggravated assault and a simple assault, only the aggravated assault is counted in the report—the accompanying simple assault would not be represented in the data. This means that UCR data may be underrepresenting certain offenses when they are committed at the same time as more serious offenses.

Property Crime Index⁴ offenses. Girls comprised nearly one-third (29 percent) of all juvenile arrests, about one-third (34 percent) of arrests for Property Crime Index offenses, and less than one-fifth (18 percent) of arrests for Violent Crime Index offenses. Although serious and violent crimes capture media and public attention, the vast majority of juvenile arrests are for less serious offenses—nonindex and status offenses⁵ accounted for three-quarters (76 percent) of all juvenile arrests.

Only 4 percent of juvenile arrests in 2005 were for Violent Crime Index offenses; aggravated assaults accounted for two-thirds (64 percent) of Violent Crime Index juvenile arrests (3 percent of all juvenile arrests). Girls comprised about one-quarter (24 percent) of all juvenile arrests for aggravated assault. By contrast, simple assaults accounted for 12 percent of all juvenile arrests; other than larceny-theft and “all other offenses,” simple assault was the offense for which police made the largest number of juvenile arrests (247,900). Significantly, girls accounted for one-third (33 percent) of juvenile arrests for simple assault, the largest female proportion of arrests for any type of violent crime.

Although girls comprise a smaller overall portion of juvenile arrests than boys, the two groups’ arrest patterns have diverged somewhat over the past decade. As the percentage changes in table 1 indicate, juvenile arrests generally decreased between 1996 and 2005, but the decrease was greater for boys than for girls; the exception to the general trend was arrests for simple assault, which increased for girls while decreasing for boys.⁶

Arrests for aggravated assault comprise the single largest component

of the Violent Crime Index, and arrests for simple assault are the largest component of nonindex violent arrests. As shown in table 1, boys’ arrests for aggravated assault decreased nearly one-quarter (–23 percent) between 1996 and 2005, while girls’ arrests decreased far less (–5 percent). In contrast, girls’ arrests for simple assault increased nearly one-quarter (24 percent), while boys’ arrests decreased slightly (–4 percent). For Violent Crime Index offenses, arrests of males decreased more substantially (–28 percent) than did arrests of females (–10 percent). Between 1996 and 2005, the overall total of juvenile arrests dropped about 22 percent, primarily because arrests of males decreased 29 percent, whereas arrests of females decreased 14 percent.

Table 1: Percent Change in Male and Female Juvenile Arrests for Violent Crimes, 1996–2005

Type	Girls	Boys
Aggravated assault	–5.4%	–23.4%
Simple assault	24.0	–4.1
Violent Crime Index	–10.2	–27.9
All crimes	–14.3	–28.7

Source: *Crime in the United States, 2005*—Table 33 (FBI, 2006)

Steffensmeier and colleagues (2005) assess statistically whether the gender difference in arrest trends over the past two decades has been narrowing, widening, or has remained essentially stable. Based on UCR arrest data from 1980 through 2003, their analysis found that the gender difference in arrest rates is essentially stable for homicide, rape, and robbery but has narrowed considerably for aggravated assault and simple assault (Steffensmeier et al., 2005).

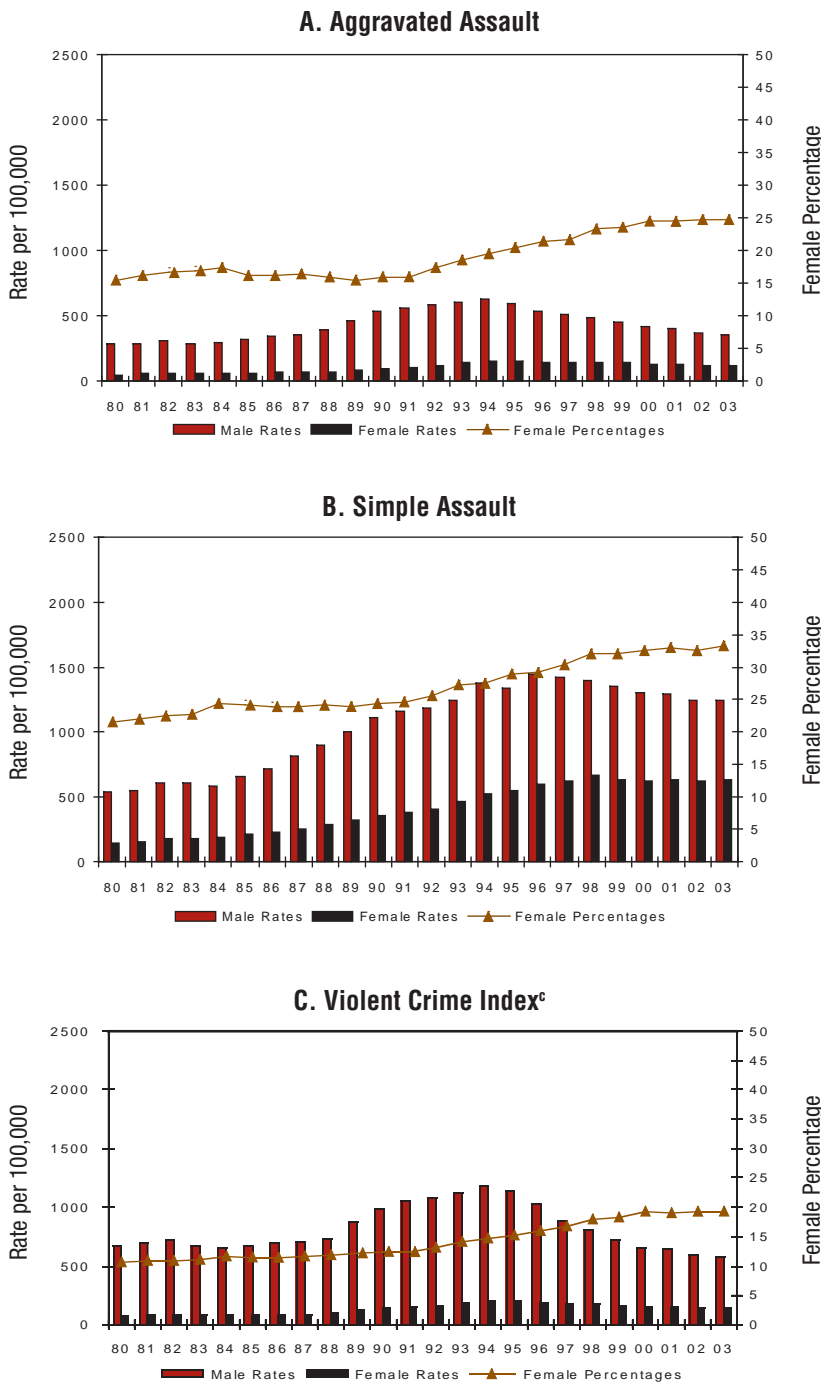
The gender difference for the Violent Crime Index has also narrowed significantly, but this narrowing is largely attributable to the rise in female juvenile arrest rates for aggravated assault during the 1990s (see figure 1). If arrests for aggravated assault are omitted from the Index, the trend is essentially stable.

To better show what a narrowing or widening gender difference in violence means, figure 1 plots juvenile female and male arrest rate trends for aggravated assault, simple assault, and the Violent Crime Index (sum of arrests for homicide, robbery, rape, and aggravated assault), along with the female percentage of arrests, according to the UCR.

Over the past two decades, clear changes have occurred in girls’ arrests and between boys’ and girls’ patterns of arrests in aggravated and simple assault. As figure 1 indicates, boys’ and girls’ arrests for aggravated assault diverged conspicuously—the female arrest rate in 2003 (88.3 girls per 100,000) was nearly double the arrest rate in 1980 (45 girls per 100,000). Although males’ arrest rate for aggravated assault was five times higher than that of females, males’ proportional increase from 1980 to 2003 (12.5 percent, from 239.4 to 269.5 boys per 100,000) was much more modest than that of girls.

The juvenile arrest rate for simple assaults is more than three times greater than the rate for aggravated assaults. Again, changes in the arrest rates of females for simple assault over the past two decades have greatly outpaced those of males. The arrest rate of girls for simple assault in 2003 was more than triple (3.5 times) the rate in 1980 (478.3 versus 129.7 per 100,000). Although male arrests for simple assaults started from a higher base rate, that rate

Figure 1: Trends in Juvenile Female and Male Arrest Rates^a (per 100,000) and Juvenile Female Percentage of Arrests^b for Violent Offending: Uniform Crime Reports, 1980–2003



barely doubled over the same period (934.4 versus 462.7 per 100,000). Arrest rates for both groups peaked in the mid-1990s, and then male rates exhibited a much sharper dropoff than female rates. Moreover, while the male juvenile arrest rate for Violent Crime Index offenses was lower in 2003 than in 1980, the rate for girls was much higher—the girls’ arrest rate for Violent Crime Index offenses rose from 70.4 to 103.1 per 100,000 between 1980 and 2003, a 46-percent increase. Thus, the juvenile “crime drop” of the past decade reflects primarily changes in arrest rates for boys.

In general, the gender difference in arrests has narrowed considerably for aggravated assault and simple assault and has also narrowed for the Violent Crime Index—the female percentage of juvenile arrests held steady during the 1980s, followed by a fairly steep rise in the female share of juvenile arrests during the 1990s. The Index trend essentially matches the pattern for aggravated assault, primarily because the large arrest volumes for aggravated assault (two-thirds of all Violent Index offenses) swamped the effects of arrest trends in the other Index violent crimes during the 1990s.

Figure 1 helps clarify whether the movement in arrest rates is similar for both genders and whether substantial gender differences in juvenile arrests for violent offenses still exist. Data indicate that trends in arrest rates are roughly similar for both genders across all violent crime categories, but with some divergence since the mid-1990s. For example, arrest rates rose for both boys and girls over much of the past two decades, particularly during 1986–94. Then rates leveled off or declined in the late 1990s for boys, while rates

^a Rates are adjusted for the gender composition of the population and for changes in UCR coverage over time. The population base includes ages 12–17.

^b Female Percentage = Female Rate / (Female Rate + Male Rate) x 100%

^c The Violent Crime Index includes homicide, aggravated assault, rape, and robbery

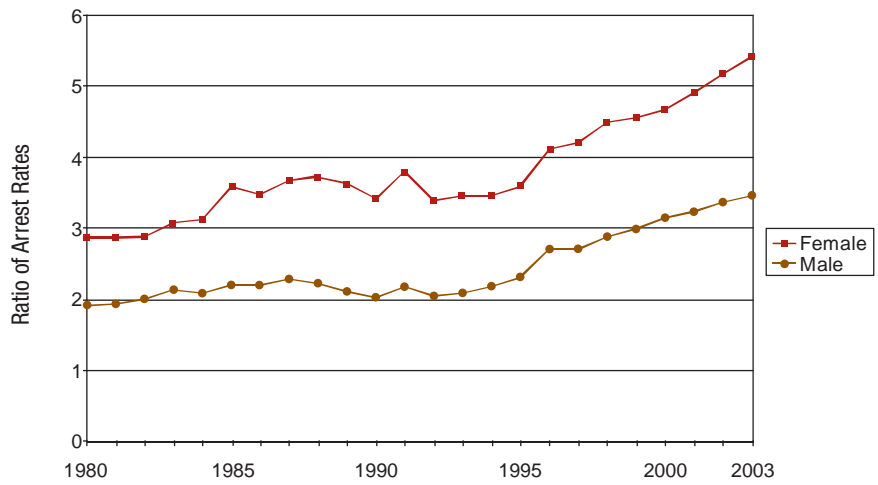
Source: Steffensmeier et al., 2005. Permission was given by the American Society of Criminology to reprint this figure, which was originally published in *Criminology* (Vol. 43, No. 2).

for girls merely stabilized or continued to inch upward. Therefore, the narrowing difference in trends (particularly for both types of assault) is at least partly a function of the recent downward movement in boys arrest rates for violence.

Figure 2 compares the simple/aggravated assault arrest rate ratios (arrest rate for simple assault divided by the arrest rate for aggravated assault) over two decades for boys and girls. These ratios and changes in the ratios indicate the relative seriousness of offenses for which police have arrested juveniles. In 1980, the ratio for girls was 2.9, which means that police arrested girls for simple assault about three times as often as they arrested girls for aggravated assault. They arrested boys for simple assault about twice (1.9 times) as often as they arrested boys for aggravated assault. By 2003, police arrested girls more than five times (5.4) as often for simple assault as for aggravated assault. By contrast, the ratio of boys' arrests for simple to aggravated assault was just over threefold (3.5). These ratios show that (1) arrests for simple assault are more common than for aggravated assault (i.e., the ratios for both boys and girls are greater than 1.0) and (2) simple assaults comprise a larger percentage of arrests for girls than for boys (i.e., the simple/aggravated assault ratios are consistently higher for girls than for boys), particularly in recent years.

These differences in ratios are partly explained by gender differences in the underlying trends for aggravated and simple assaults. The large decline in boys' arrests for aggravated assaults over the past decade raised their ratio of simple to aggravated assault. By contrast, the larger increase in the girls' ratio of simple to aggravated assault is attributable

Figure 2: Ratio of Simple/Aggravated Assault Rates for Juvenile Males and Females, 1980–2003



Source: National Center for Juvenile Justice (February 28, 2005), available at www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstatbb/crime/excel/jar_20050228.xls.

to their large increase in arrests for simple assault over the same period.

The statistics on juvenile arrests for assault point to certain conclusions about the seriousness of girls' violence, especially relative to the seriousness of boys' violence. Although juvenile arrests for assault—regardless of gender—are far more likely to involve simple assault than aggravated assault, the fact that the ratio of simple to aggravated assault arrests is much higher for girls than boys suggests that most girls' violence is of a less serious nature than boys' violence. Moreover, one of the reasons that boys are more likely than girls to be charged with aggravated assault is that boys use weapons more frequently and physically inflict more injury on their victims—both indicators of the relative seriousness of boys' versus girls' violence. Finally, although girls' rate of arrest for simple assault has increased over the decades, their arrest rate for aggravated assault has not.

Despite dramatic changes in the number and rate of arrests and in simple/aggravated assault ratios, the question remains whether these trends signify a real change in girls' underlying violent behavior or reflect other factors.

Researchers have examined the changing nature of assaults over the past decades by comparing ratios of aggravated assaults to homicides (e.g., Zimring, 1998) or ratios of assaults to robberies (e.g., Zimring and Hawkins, 1997; Snyder and Sickmund, 2000). Because arrests for assault increased without corresponding increases in arrests for homicide or robbery, these analysts attribute the increases in assault arrests to changes in law enforcement policies, such as responses to domestic violence, rather than to actual increases in assaults. Several factors relevant to interpreting statistics on girls' arrests for assault must be considered:

What Do We Learn From Self-Report Data?

In contrast to official arrest statistics, self-report data from the Monitoring the Future surveys show that levels of assault for juvenile females and males have been fairly constant over the past two decades and that female involvement in violence has not increased relative to male violence.

self-reported assaults, the researchers calculated prevalence (one or more incidents) and high frequency (five or more incidents) estimates for an assault index comprising three assault items⁷ for 12th graders (ages 17–18). Data indicate marked stability in the separate trends for both boys and girls for the assault index over the 1980–2003 period, regardless of whether prevalence or high-frequency measures are used.

These statistical patterns are illustrated in figure 3 (p. 8), where the trends over the past two decades show overall stability (i.e., random fluctuations rather than any consistent upward or downward trend). Assault rates among both girls and boys are relatively unchanged over this period, although female assault levels are consistently lower than male levels for both prevalence and high-frequency measures. Also, the gender difference in high-frequency violent assaults is quite large: Girls account for an average of about 15 percent of high-frequency assaults, compared with about 35 percent for less frequent or minor involvement in violence.

- Law enforcement policies that lower the threshold for reporting an assault or for classifying an assault as aggravated may create the appearance of a “crime wave” when the underlying behavior remains relatively stable.
- Heightened sensitivity to domestic violence has led many States and localities to implement “mandatory arrest” policies in response to domestic disturbances. Behaviors once considered “ungovernable” (a status offense) may, in a domestic situation, result instead in an arrest for simple assault—possibly in response to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 2002, which requires States to decriminalize and deinstitutionalize status offenses (Schneider, 1984; Mahoney and Fenster, 1982; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 2004; Girls Inc., 1996).
- Family dynamics may also contribute to gender differences in juvenile arrests for assault. Parents have different expectations about their sons’ and daughters’ obedience to parental authority (Chesney-Lind, 1988), and these expectations may affect how the justice system responds to a girl’s behavior when she “acts out” within the home (Krause and McShane, 1994). Research indicates that girls fight with family members or siblings more frequently than boys, who more often fight with friends or strangers (Bloom et al., 2002). Some research suggests that girls are three times as likely as boys to assault a family member (Franke, Huynh-Hohnbaum, and Chung, 2002).
- Policies of mandatory arrest for domestic violence, initially adopted to protect victims from further attacks, also provide parents with

another method for attempting to control their “unruly” daughters. Regardless of who initiates a violent domestic incident, law enforcement first responders may consider it more practical and efficient to identify the youth as the offender, especially when the parent is the caretaker for other children in the home (Gaarder, Rodriguez, and Zatz, 2004).

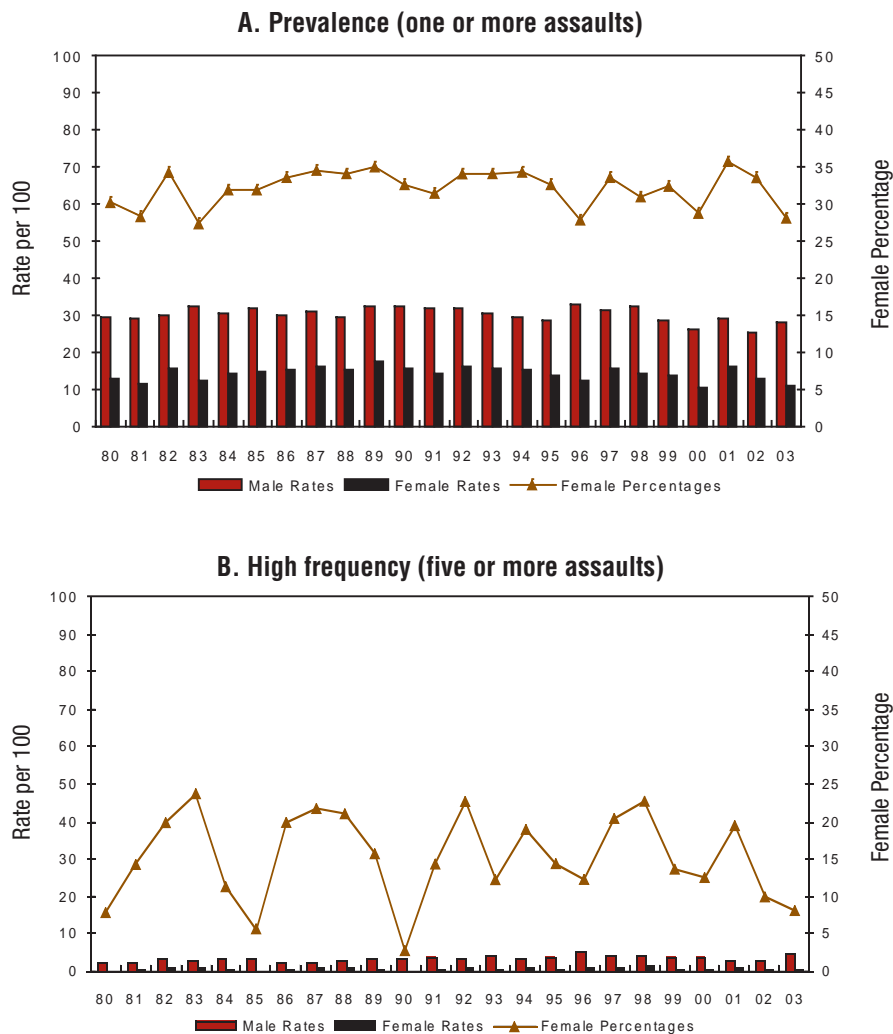
- It is possible that school officials’ adoption of zero-tolerance policies toward youth violence may increase the number of youth referred to police for schoolyard tussles that schools previously handled internally.

One way of assessing the “policy change hypothesis” is to compare girls’ arrest trends for violent offenses to trends reflected in self-report and victimization data, using MTF and NCVS. Unlike the UCR, these data are not limited to cases that come to the attention of the police or result in arrests. If higher female arrest rates for violent crime are a byproduct of policy changes, then one would expect to find disagreement between official and unofficial data sources, with arrest data showing noticeably larger gains in female violence than found in self-report or victimization data. In contrast, if higher female rates reflect true changes in the aggressive tendencies of girls, then data sources should generally be in agreement.

Trends in Self-Reported Assaults: Monitoring the Future Data

As with the UCR arrest data, Steffensmeier and colleagues (2005) used MTF data from 1980 through 2003 to explore female-versus-male trends with tests to determine any statistical differences. Focusing on

Figure 3: Trends in Female and Male Self-Reported Assault* and Female Percentage of Violent Offending: Monitoring the Future, 1980–2003 (17- and 18-year-olds)



* Items in the assault index include (1) hit instructor/supervisor, (2) fight at school/work, and (3) hurt someone badly in a fight.

Source: Steffensmeier et al., 2005. Permission was given by the American Society of Criminology to reprint this figure, which was originally published in *Criminology* (Vol. 43, No. 2).

Trends in Victims' Reports of Assaults: National Crime Victimization Survey Data

Steffensmeier and colleagues (2005) also analyzed NCVS data to explore trends in assault and violence as reported by victims. Again, their analysis relies on statistical tests and illustrative plots of female-versus-male trends

during 1980–2003. The results indicate that the rates of violence among adolescent females relative to rates among adolescent males have changed very little during this period (i.e., year-to-year changes in female-versus-male rates are not statistically significant). This is true for violent offenses in general and assault in particular. The trends for both aggravated

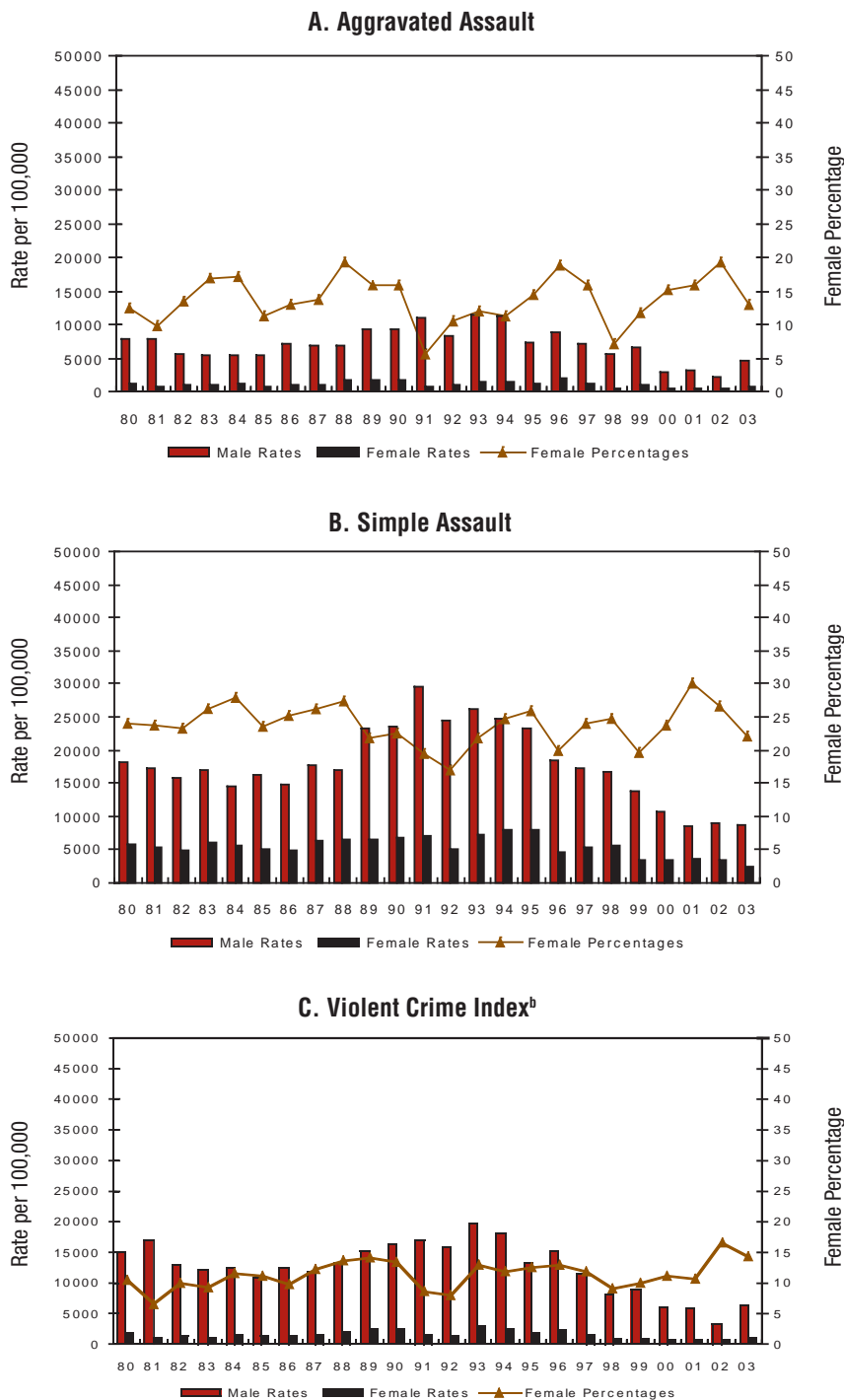
assault and simple assault are stable, a pattern contrary to UCR arrest trends, which show a narrowing gender gap. The gender difference in NCVS trends is also stable for the Violent Crime Index, also contrary to the UCR trends.

Figure 4 (p. 9) illustrates these findings by showing NCVS rates of violence for juvenile males and females (per 100,000), along with the relevant female percentages. Based on NCVS reports, girls' violence levels are much lower than boys' levels. Girls' rates typically rise when boys' rates rise and decline when boys' rates decline (i.e., male and female rates move in tandem), yielding a stable gender gap in overall violence. Similar to UCR data, girls' and boys' assault rates rose during the late 1980s through the early 1990s and then tapered off, but the rise is smaller and the decline is greater in the NCVS series than in the UCR series.

The NCVS data show both girls' and boys' rates of assault dropping considerably in recent years, whereas the UCR data show that assault arrest rates declined only for boys. This telling difference between the two data sources supports the conclusion that policy shifts and changes in enforcement may have had a greater impact on arrest rates than have actual changes in the behavior of girls.

The gender difference in violence is fairly comparable between NCVS and UCR figures in earlier years, but the two sources diverge in more recent years, as would be expected based on the policy change hypothesis. For example, the female percentage for the assault index (defined the same in the NCVS as in the UCR as aggravated assaults, simple assaults, and other offenses against persons) in the early 1980s was about 18–20 percent in both the NCVS and the

Figure 4: Trends in Juvenile Female and Male Violence Rates^a (per 100,000) and Female Percentage of Violent Offending: National Crime Victimization Survey, 1980–2003



^a Data are adjusted to take into account effects of the survey redesign in 1992. The multiplier is offense and sex specific and is calculated based only on juvenile data. The formula is: Multiplier = (n92 + n93 + n94)/(n90 + n91 + n92).

^b The Violent Crime Index includes aggravated assault, rape, and robbery.

Source: Steffensmeier et al., 2005. Permission was given by the American Society of Criminology to reprint this figure, which was originally published in *Criminology* (Vol. 43, No. 2).

What Do We Learn From Victimization Data?

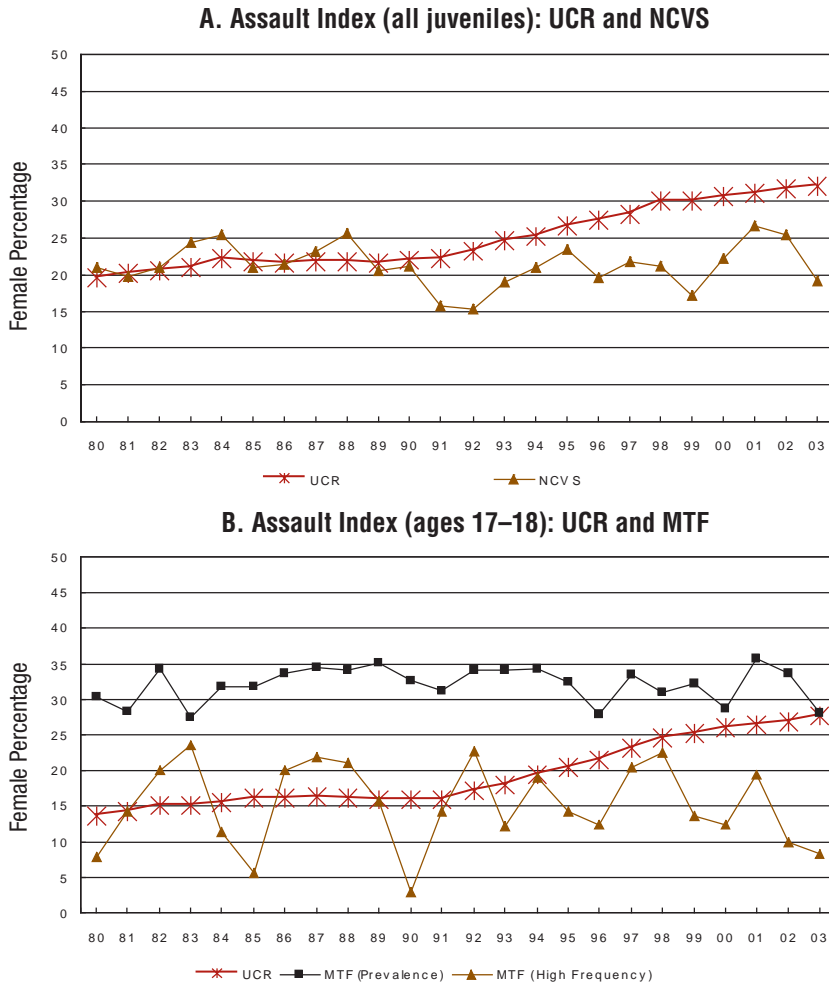
In contrast to official arrest statistics, victimization data from the National Crime Victimization Survey show very little change in the gender gap for assault crimes and the Violent Crime Index over the past two decades and since the 1994 peak in violent crimes.

UCR—essentially no difference; by the late 1990s, however, the percentage holds steady at about 20 percent in the NCVS but jumps to about 30 percent in the UCR. Sizable declines in NCVS assault rates in recent years have considerably outpaced the much smaller declines in UCR assault arrest rates, particularly among adolescent girls.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the NCVS data:

- First, gender differences in juvenile violent offending, including assault, have not changed meaningfully or systematically in the NCVS data since 1980. The NCVS assault finding stands in sharp contrast to UCR arrest statistics, where the gender difference has narrowed significantly for both simple and aggravated assault.
- Second, the NCVS series reveals sharp declines in assault crimes among both girls and boys since about the mid-1990s, but girls' declines are not seen in the UCR arrest data. This discrepancy in the two data sources may be caused in part by changes in policies and practices.
- Third, these possible changes in policy are particularly salient for girls, whose arrest figures have

Figure 5: Summary of Trends in Juvenile Gender Gap for Assault in Arrest Data Compared With Victimization and Self-Report Sources: Uniform Crime Reports, National Crime Victimization Survey, and Monitoring the Future, 1980–2003



Source: Steffensmeier et al., 2005. Permission was given by the American Society of Criminology to reprint this figure, which was originally published in *Criminology* (Vol. 43, No. 2).

continued to rise or barely level off compared with victim reports that show sizable declines in girls' assaults since at least the mid-1990s.

graphs clearly show the upward trend in the female percent of arrests for assaults based on UCR arrest data, while the trends based on victimization data and self-reports have been fairly stable over time.

Summary

Figure 5 highlights the differences in trends between official arrest data (UCR) and victimization (NCVS) and self-report (MTF) sources. These

Context of Girls' Violence

In addition to analyzing juvenile violence trends in arrests, victimization, and self-reported behavior to

gain insight into female offending patterns, the Girls Study Group has explored the context in which girls exhibit violence. In a nationally representative sample, research has found that for both girls and boys, physical aggression is most common among same-sex peers, accounting for about 50 percent of incidents in which adolescents are violent (Franke et al., 2002). For girls who are physically assaultive, a family member is the second most common target (20.2 percent of girls' compared with

What Have We Learned About Trends In Girls' and Boys' Violence?

Across all data sources, the gender difference in trends for minor kinds of violence (e.g., simple assault) is much smaller than the gender difference for more serious violence (e.g., aggravated assault). In contrast to conclusions about rises in girls' violence based on arrest statistics (UCR), the results from other sources (MTF and NCVS) show very little overall change in girls' assault levels or in Violent Crime Index offenses and essentially no change in the gender differences or female-to-male ratio of violent offending.



5.7 percent of boys' fights are with family members). The second most common target of boys' assaults is strangers. Consistent with this pattern, girls' violence more often occurs at home, whereas boys' violence more often occurs away from home. Findings that girls are particularly likely to act violently in certain settings or under certain conditions affirm the importance of examining the context of violence for insights into why girls are sometimes violent.

Violence Against Peers

Girls and boys are more likely to attack their same-sex peers than any other type of victim (Franke et al., 2002), as noted above. A study by Lockwood (1997) found that, regardless of gender, the most common reasons youth were violent toward peers was to punish them for something done or said, to get them to back down from offensive actions, and in self-defense. Physical touching, often aggressive, was the most frequent immediate precipitator of a violent incident. The second most common trigger of peer violence was negative verbal exchanges.

Other researchers have examined the relationship between physical violence and relational aggression, which includes trying to damage the social standing or self-esteem of peers by using verbal rejection, gossip, rumor spreading, and social ostracism (Cairns et al., 1989; Galen and Underwood, 1997). In some social and cultural groups, the influences against fighting weaken the connection of relational aggression to physical violence; specifically, Goodwin (1990) found that among middle-class African American youth, episodes of relational aggression were followed by nonphysical confrontations and ostracism but

Context Defined

Context includes targets (e.g., peers, family members); specific settings (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, peer groups); and the precursors (e.g., prior victimization, relational aggression) leading up to an act of violence.

not by physical fighting. Corsaro and Eder (1990) found that relational aggression among economically disadvantaged girls may be more likely to escalate into physical fighting, perhaps due to a need or desire to emphasize one's own toughness and independence. Whether relational aggression leads to physical fighting may be tempered by other factors such as social class and local community and peer group norms (on peer group norms, see Crick, Bigbee, and Howe, 1996).

Research indicates that another factor in girls' violence against other girls involves the contradictory messages girls receive regarding sexuality. For most girls, models and images of healthy sexual desire are rare or nonexistent (Welles, 2005). Rigid imagery about "appropriate" behavior for girls can emphasize being attractive to and desired by boys and at the same time, send girls messages that they are valued for abstaining from sexual behavior. A great deal of societal emphasis is placed on being thin and looking like a supermodel or a Barbie doll (Schooler, Ward, and Merriwether, 2004; Wolf, 1991; Bordo, 1993; Davis, 1995). Artz (1997) found that the girls at risk for engaging in same-sex peer violence did not have any sense of themselves or other girls as having their own legitimate sexual desires or being valued. They understood their own sexual value only in relation to how they satisfied males and lived up to idealized standards of femininity. Thus, these girls were

quick to strike out at other girls who threatened their view of self or their relationships with valued males.

Violence Against Family Members

After peers, family members are the second most common target of girls' violence. Data from the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System for 2001 (FBI, 2003), analyzing reports of assaults by juvenile males and females by type of victim, clearly show that girls are more likely to be involved in both aggravated and simple assaults against adult family members than are their male peers, as shown in table 2 (p. 12).

When a girl uses violence against a family member, a parent—usually the mother—is the most common target.⁸

Prior victimization (in the home, in the community, or at school) appears to be a significant precursor to violent behavior for girls (Song, Singer, and Anglin, 1998; Molnar et al., 2005). Violence against a family member may also be a result of social learning that takes place when girls watch family and others who are constantly assaulting them and each other (Miller, 2001). Although girls are more likely than boys to internalize negative emotions when victimized (e.g., become depressed or anxious), they do sometimes exhibit externalizing behavior, using violence in self-defense, to prevent further attack, or because they are angry.

Table 2: Type of Victim in Aggravated and Simple Assaults by Boys and Girls

Type of Victim	Simple Assault		Aggravated Assault	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Juvenile family	5%	5%	4%	7%
Juvenile acquaintance	54	49	45	40
Juvenile stranger	5	3	6	2
Adult family	17	23	12	21
Adult acquaintance	16	17	21	24
Adult stranger	4	3	12	6

Source: Information for this table was provided by Howard Snyder (Director of Systems Research at the National Center for Juvenile Justice), using data from the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System for 2001 (FBI, 2003).

Research indicates that in cultures that are very patriarchal and/or that devalue females, girls may be more at risk for abuse, neglect, and sexual assault (Jiwani, Janovicek, and Cameron, 2002). However, no research adequately examines whether this greater abuse or control of girls in some cultural groups translates into the girls' greater use of violence, either inside or outside the family. It is plausible that in very patriarchal families, gender-related restrictions on girls severely limit girls' use of violence and their expression of anger. A study by Heimer and DeCoster (1999) using self-report survey data showed that girls who have traditional views of gender, and, therefore, traditional views of female behavior, are less likely to engage in violence.

Violence in Schools

Although school-related deaths, violent victimizations in school, and overall school crime declined during the 1990s (Kaufman et al., 2001), public concern about school safety increased, especially in the wake of several highly publicized school shootings between 1992 and 1999

(Anderson et al., 2001). The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance surveys (YRBSS), conducted biannually in schools in 32 States and certain localities by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, provide statistics regarding violent behavior by students. The 2003 survey shows that fighting is common among high school students: 33 percent of students (40.5 percent of males and 25.1 percent of females) surveyed had been in a physical fight in the last year (Grunbaum et al., 2004). Research has also shown that girls' violent delinquency is greater in middle schools than in high schools, independent of a girl's age. (Payne and Gottfredson, 2005). Furthermore, in 2004, 32 percent of all serious, violent crimes (including rape, sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault) against youth ages 12–18 occurred during school or on the way to and from school (Dinkes et al., 2006).

Bullying in schools appears to differ by gender. Boys are more likely to be the perpetrators and victims of direct bullying, either with physical actions or with words or gestures. Girls, in

contrast, are more likely to be the perpetrators and victims of indirect bullying, or relational aggression, such as spreading rumors. In addition, boys are more often the perpetrators in bullying incidents in which girls were the victims (Olweus, 1993; Isernhagen Harris, 2003).

Although girls are not frequently violent in schools, when they behave violently they may do so to protect themselves. Some studies have found that girls intensify their fighting to stop their own victimization (including sexual harassment) and when they feel this victimization is ignored by school officials (Brown, 1998; Belknap, Dunn, and Holsinger, 1997).

Some teachers communicate a very restrictive standard for what is considered "appropriate" behavior for boys as compared with girls. When teachers hold girls and boys to different standards, they can create an atmosphere that indirectly encourages girls to use violence. Research on a school with a socially diverse student body found that teachers sometimes created a hostile environment that fed antagonisms among groups of youth (Rosenbloom and Way, 2004). In another study, some girls who perceived themselves as negatively "marked" by minority racial and socioeconomic identity maintained their status in school by not backing down when they were threatened by peers and/or when they were angry with teachers. Some also reported saving face or earning status through their prowess in fighting (Leitz, 2003).

Girls may also fight out of a sense of hopelessness. A recent ethnographic study of low-income girls in Philadelphia found that the girls thought their futures were bleak regardless of what they did at school. They felt alienated from legitimate institutions, including schools, and felt that entanglement

with the law could not make things worse (Ness, 2004).

Poverty and Disorganized Communities

Poverty concentrates mothers and their children in neighborhoods characterized by few legitimate opportunities to earn money, a prevalence of illegitimate opportunities, and limited and strained public health, mental health, educational, and recreational resources. Several studies have found a link between exposure to violence in disorganized communities and youth's use of violence (DuRant et al., 1994; Burman, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 1997). A recent longitudinal study (Molnar et al., 2005) of adolescent girls in Chicago found that girls were more likely to perpetrate violence if they had previously been victimized and if they lived in neighborhoods with a high concentration of poverty or with high homicide rates.

A girl living in a disorganized neighborhood may be more likely to use violence for a number of reasons (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In communities that lack informal institutions for monitoring and supervising youth's behavior, risk of victimization is high, and girls may be violent to prevent or stop attacks on themselves (Leitz, 2003). Parents who are themselves coping with structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods and poverty may lack the capacity to buffer the negative environment for their daughters by, for example, providing close monitoring or safe places for recreation and socializing. In such communities, schools and recreational activities often do not provide safe places for youth, leaving girls to their own devices to establish status among peers and to prevent and

counteract violence against themselves. As discussed earlier, willingness to fight and prowess in fighting are two of the few ways that youth feel they can gain status in communities with few opportunities to develop talents or succeed in school. Status may be enhanced for girls who are willing to fight, because these girls are valuable to friends who might need protection and also because they can protect themselves (Jones, 2004; Ness, 2004).

A girl's physical maturity may place her at special risk in disorganized neighborhoods. Girls with early-onset puberty who live in neighborhoods of highly concentrated disadvantage are at significantly greater risk for violent behaviors when compared to early-maturing girls who live in less disadvantaged neighborhoods (Obeidallah et al., 2004). This finding has several possible explanations. Early-maturing girls who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods may be particularly prone to affiliate with delinquent peers (Ge et al., 2002). These girls might become involved with older boys who are attracted to them, and the older boys might model and encourage girls' use of violence (Ge et al., 2002). Some studies suggest that girls with boyfriends who live in disorganized or poor communities may be more likely to engage in fighting to keep the boyfriend, who may provide important material or financial support (Ness, 2004). Finally, early-maturing girls may become involved with gangs and other negative peers in reaction to parental efforts to protect them by keeping them at home (Haynie, 2003).

Girls and Gangs

A very specific aspect of the context in which girls may exhibit violence is

their involvement in gangs. Because research relevant to understanding girls' involvement in gangs is diverse, this section offers an overview in three parts: membership, delinquency, and risk factors.

Membership

Researchers have derived estimates of girls' membership in gangs from official data sources and self-report surveys. In addition to estimating the prevalence of girls' membership, research has also examined the gender composition of gangs.

Data from official sources sometimes underestimate the extent of girls' gang membership, especially when contrasted with self-report data. For instance, Curry, Ball, and Fox (1994) found that in some jurisdictions, law enforcement policies officially exclude females from counts of gang members. Controlling for data from these cities, the researchers still found that girls represented only 5.7 percent of gang members known to law enforcement agencies.

Underestimation of girls' gang involvement based on official reports may also be partly attributable to male gang members' greater likelihood of being involved in serious crime, as well as to differences in average age of males and females in gangs (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Fagan, 1990). Boys are more likely than girls to remain gang involved into young adulthood; for girls, gang membership is much more likely to be limited to the adolescent years (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and MacKenzie, 2005; Miller, 2001; Moore and Hagedorn, 1996). These gender-related variations may increase the likelihood that male gang members will come to the attention of police more often than female gang members (Curry, 1999; Esbensen and Winfree, 1998).

On the other hand, results from youth surveys indicate that girls' gang involvement is only slightly below that of boys, particularly in early adolescence. For instance, findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study, based on a stratified sample of youth in high-risk, high-crime neighborhoods, found that approximately the same percentage of girls (29.4 percent) and boys (32.4 percent) claimed gang membership when self-definition⁹ was used as a measure (Thornberry et al., 2000). Evidence from this longitudinal study also suggests that girls' gang involvement tends to be of a shorter duration than boys', with girls' peak gang involvement around eighth and ninth grades.

In research based on youth surveys, estimates of girls' share of total gang membership range from 20 percent to 46 percent (Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen and Winfree, 1998; Fagan, 1990; Moore, 1991; Winfree et al., 1992), with wide variations from gang to gang. When female gang members in Columbus, OH, and St. Louis, MO, were asked what percentage of their gang's members were girls, answers ranged from 7 percent to 75 percent; the vast majority were in predominantly male gangs (Miller, 2001). In a survey of 366 gang members (Peterson, Miller, and Esbensen, 2001), 84 percent of males

and 93 percent of females said their gangs had both male and female members. Approximately 45 percent of the male gang members and 30 percent of the females described their gangs as having a majority of male members, and 38 percent of males and 64 percent of females said their gangs had "fairly equal" numbers of males and females. Several studies suggest that the gender composition of gangs has a significant impact on the nature of gang members' activities, including their involvement in delinquency (Joe-Laidler and Hunt, 1997; Peterson, Miller, and Esbensen, 2001; Miller, 2001).

Delinquent Activity

Girls' gang-related delinquency appears to be strongly associated with the gender organization of their groups. Fleisher and Krienert (2004) suggest that having a sizable proportion of males in their social networks increases young women's participation in delinquency and violence (see also Miller and Brunson, 2000). Peterson, Miller, and Esbensen (2001), examining delinquent activity among members of gangs classified by gender composition, found that delinquency, particularly of a serious nature, was less characteristic of primarily female gangs than of primarily male, all-male, or gender-balanced gangs. The

same researchers, however, found significant *within-gender* differences in delinquency rates for both girls and boys across the gang gender-composition categories (e.g., girls in primarily female gangs had the lowest rates of delinquency, but girls in majority-male gangs had higher rates of delinquency than boys in all-male gangs).

Gang-involved girls tend to participate in different types of activities than gang-involved boys. One study (Miller, 2001) found that most gang-involved young women did not participate routinely in the most serious forms of gang crime, in part because male members excluded them from these activities, but also because many of the young women chose not to be involved in activities they considered dangerous or morally troubling. Other researchers attribute differences in the delinquent activities of gang-involved girls and gang-involved boys to gender differences in norms supportive of violence and delinquency (Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995; see also Campbell, 1993).

Risk Factors

Researchers often have focused on the extent to which community disorganization may have contributed to the growth of gangs in many cities.¹⁰ These researchers suggest that inner-city youth join gangs as a way of adapting to oppressive living conditions imposed by their environments (see Hagedorn, 1998; Huff, 1989; Klein, 1995). A few studies have linked these conditions specifically to female gang involvement. For example, findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study suggest that growing up in disorganized, violent neighborhoods is a risk factor for gang involvement among young women (Thornberry, 1997). Gangs may help young women survive in

Girls and Gangs

Most research on girls and gangs focuses on amounts of gang involvement (over time and relative to boys) or the factors associated with gang involvement. Very little research has examined girls' violence within gangs. The research that has been done shows that boys in gangs are more violent than girls in gangs. Still, girls in gangs are more likely to be delinquent and violent than girls who are not in gangs. Peers, families, and neighborhoods have intersecting influences when girls become involved with gangs.

these neighborhoods by teaching them how to protect themselves (Fishman, 1995) and by offering protection and retaliation (Miller, 2001).

Several studies have explored the relationship between gang involvement and the family. In a study of gangs in Kansas City, MO, Fleisher (1998) documents intergenerational patterns of abuse and neglect, exacerbated by poverty and abject neighborhood conditions, which Fleisher suggests are at the heart of the gang problem (see also Campbell, 1984; Fleisher and Krienert, 2004). Moore (1991) also documents a myriad of family problems that contribute to the likelihood of gang involvement and concludes that young female gang members are especially likely to come from deeply troubled families. Female gang members are significantly more likely than male gang members (Moore, 1991) and at-risk nongang girls (Miller, 2001) to say they have experienced multiple family problems.

The ways in which family problems influence girls' gang involvement are varied, but they share a common thread: because of difficulties and dangers at home, girls began spending time away from home and meeting their social and emotional needs elsewhere. Researchers studying both male and female gang members have suggested the idea of the gang as a surrogate family for adolescents who do not see their own families as meeting their needs for belonging, nurturance, and acceptance (Huff, 1993; see also Campbell, 1990, and Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995). In a gang, girls may find a network of friends who serve as a support system for coping with life problems (Fleisher and Krienert, 2004; Joe and Chesney-Lind, 1995).

Qualitative studies of risk factors for girls' involvement in gangs have focused on the influence of community conditions and family problems. Some survey-based studies, however, note various school-related attitudes and individual behaviors as risk factors or correlates for girls' involvement in gangs. School-related attitudes include low expectations for completing school (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993; Bowker and Klein, 1983; Thornberry, 1997), lack of school commitment (Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998), and negative attitudes toward school (Thornberry, 1997). Individual characteristics/behaviors include commitment to negative peers (Esbensen and Deschenes, 1998); delinquency, drug use, and positive values about drugs (Thornberry, 1997); and delinquent peers and early onset of sexual activity (Bjerregaard and Smith, 1993).

Conclusions

What We Know About Girls and Violence

Trends

Available evidence based on arrest, victimization, and self-report data suggests that although girls are currently arrested more for simple assaults than previously, the actual incidence of their being seriously violent has not changed much over the last two decades. This suggests that increases in arrests may be attributable more to changes in enforcement policies than to changes in girls' behavior. Juvenile female involvement in violence has not increased relative to juvenile male violence. There is no burgeoning national crisis of increasing serious violence among adolescent girls.

Context

Although more information is needed, current literature suggests that girls' violence occurs in the following situations, for the following reasons:

- **Peer violence.** Girls fight with peers to gain status, to defend their sexual reputation, and in self-defense against sexual harassment.
- **Family violence.** Girls fight more frequently at home with parents than do boys, who engage more frequently in violence outside the household. Girls' violence against parents is multidimensional: for some, it represents striking back against what they view as an overly controlling structure; for others, it is a defense against or an expression of anger stemming from being sexually and or physically abused by members of the household.
- **Violence within schools.** When girls fight in schools, they may do so as a result of teacher labeling, in self-defense, or out of a general sense of hopelessness.
- **Violence within disadvantaged neighborhoods.** Girls in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to perpetrate violence against others because of the increased risk of victimization (and the resulting violent self-defense against that victimization), parental inability to counteract negative community influences, and lack of opportunities for success.
- **Girls in gangs.** Survey research has shown a number of factors associated with girls' involvement in gangs (e.g., attitudes toward school, peers, delinquency, drug use, and early sexual activity);

qualitative research points to the role of disadvantaged neighborhoods and families with multiple problems (violence, drug and alcohol abuse, neglect). Girls associated with primarily male gangs exhibit more violence than those in all-female gangs. Girls in gangs are more violent than other girls but less violent than boys in gangs.

What We Need To Know

Available evidence strongly suggests that girls are, over time, being arrested more frequently for simple assaults, despite evidence from longitudinal self-report and victimization surveys that they are not actually more violent. The reasons for increasing arrests, however, are not well established. Studies of police and court practices—particularly with regard to girls—are sorely needed. Evaluations of domestic violence laws and zero-tolerance school policies and enforcement practices are also crucial.

It is also important to develop a better understanding of the consequences for girls of increased involvement in the juvenile justice system. Longitudinal studies of girls who are arrested for assaultive behavior would help us better understand the pathways to and consequences of arrests for violent behavior among girls.

Although there does not appear to be a large increase in physical violence committed by girls, some girls do engage in violent behavior, and it is important to understand the context in which such violence occurs and how these situations differ for girls and boys. Although peers and family members are the most common targets of violence by girls, not all family or peer conflicts result in physical

assault. Understanding which ones do, and why, remains vital for both prevention and intervention efforts.

Endnotes

1. The MTF study is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Findings are available online at www.monitoringthefuture.org.
2. Note that UCR data count the number of arrests, not the number of individuals arrested. An unknown number of individuals are arrested more than once during a year.
3. The Violent Crime Index includes homicide, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assaults.
4. The Property Crime Index includes burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.
5. Nonindex offenses are simple assault, weapons offenses, drug and liquor law violations, driving under the influence, disorderly conduct, vandalism, and other categories not included in the FBI's Crime Indexes. Status offenses are acts that are offenses only when committed by juveniles (e.g., running away).
6. Aggravated assault is defined as "an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury. This type of assault usually is accompanied by the use of a weapon or by means likely to produce death or great bodily harm" (FBI, 2004, p. 23). Simple assault is defined as including "all assaults which do not involve the use of a firearm, knife, cutting instrument, or other dangerous weapon and in which the victim did not sustain

serious or aggravated injuries. Agencies must classify as simple assault such offenses as assault and battery, injury caused by culpable negligence, intimidation, coercion, and all attempts to commit these offenses" (FBI, 2004, p. 26).

7. The 12th graders were asked how often during the past 12 months they had: (1) "hit an instructor or supervisor," (2) "gotten into a serious fight at school or at work," and (3) "hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or a doctor."
8. Some research indicates that parents are more likely to be violent toward adolescents than adolescents are toward their parents (Browne and Hamilton, 1998; Straus and Gelles, 1990). In a survey of college students (Browne and Hamilton, 1998), 80 percent of the youth who were violent toward parents said their parents were violent toward them, whereas only 59 percent of mothers' violence and 71 percent



of fathers' violence was met with or precipitated by violence from the youth.

9. A number of scholars now use self-definition as a measure of gang membership, either alone or in conjunction with more restrictive guidelines. Some researchers suggest that only youth who are members of groups involved in illegal activities should be classified as gang members (see Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher, 1993; Esbensen and Huizinga, 1993). However, Winfree et al. (1992: 34–35) found that the “self-reported definition of gang membership proved to be a better predictor of gang-related crime than the more restrictive definition,” which they speculate may be a result of fringe or “wannabe” members' efforts to demonstrate gang membership. Additional evidence supporting the utility of self-definition as a measure of gang membership comes from studies that have found large and stable differences between self-identified gang members and nongang youth with regard to rates of involvement in delinquency and serious crime (see Fagan, 1990).
10. Larger cities and suburban counties consistently account for the largest proportion (around 85 percent) of reported gang members (Egley and Major, 2004). Because research has focused on urban gangs, less is known about the social processes that explain gang formation—and girls' gang involvement—in rural and suburban areas, although some scholars have hypothesized possible cultural diffusion processes (see Klein, 1995; Miller, 2001).

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Acknowledgments

The Girls Study Group is a group of multidisciplinary experts who have been convened to assess current knowledge about the patterns and causes of female delinquency and to design appropriate intervention programs based on this information.

This Bulletin was compiled by Margaret A. Zahn (Principal Investigator of the Girls Study Group project) and Susan Brumbaugh, with the assistance of Tara Williams, and is based on excerpts from manuscripts written for the Girls Study Group by the following authors:

- Barry Feld* and Darrell Steffensmeier*: trends (permission to use previously published material from Darrell Steffensmeier is granted by *Criminology*).
- Merry Morash* and Meda Chesney-Lind*: context.
- Allison Ann Payne, Denise Gottfredson, Candace Kruttschnitt*: violence within schools.
- Jody Miller*: girls in gangs.

Additional analyses on peers were contributed by Howard Snyder, Director of Systems Research at the National Center for Juvenile Justice.

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This Bulletin was prepared under cooperative agreement number #2004-JF-FX-K001 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice.

Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of OJJDP or the U.S. Department of Justice.

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