



Risks, Outcomes, and Evidence-Based Interventions for Girls in the US Juvenile Justice System

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Juvenile justice, girls, delinquency, intervention, risk factors, justice system

POPULATION GROUP

Youth in conflict with the law, at-risk youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety;
Coordinated & Youth Friendly
Communities

RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

SOURCE

Academic

“Because of tragic histories of multigenerational system involvement and the subsequent involvement in the child welfare system of girls’ own children, the development of intervention models that address intimate partner choices and subsequent relationship adjustment are clearly indicated for juvenile justice involved girls.”

1. What is the research about?

Statistics show that the proportion of females in the juvenile justice (JJ) population is rising. With most studies on crime and deviance having been focused on males, there is a knowledge gap when it comes to girls’ delinquency. This study provides a review of the research evidence based on girls’ delinquency and their involvement in the juvenile justice system. It identifies gaps and offers recommendations for future research and intervention work.

2. Where did the research take place?

The study is a research and intervention review focusing on girls involved with the U.S. juvenile justice system. The literature was taken primarily from the work of American scholars.

3. Who is this research about?

This research concerns youth who have had police contact, have been adjudicated, and/or have been otherwise involved in the JJ system in the USA. The review is used to inform interventions and further research on girls’ delinquency.

4. How was the research done?

The review examines the empirical evidence across four domains:

- Familial, contextual and individual risk factors that make it more likely a girl will be detained, and protective factors that have positive effects on at-risk girls’ outcomes and compensate for risk exposure;
- Mental health, substance use, and sexual and physical health characteristics of girls in the JJ system;
- Adjustment and relationship outcomes for JJ-involved girls during late adolescence and adulthood after their initial involvement in the JJ system; and
- Evidence-based interventions for JJ-involved girls.

The review excluded research and intervention work in community samples, aggressive/delinquent samples or other high-risk samples of girls unless involved in the JJ. This is because involvement in the JJ system translates into system, individual, and community-level costs. They have also focused only on interventions that have an underlying evidence base or have been evaluated using randomized controlled trials.

5. What are the key findings?

The researchers laid out the following research recommendations after presenting a comprehensive overview of the risk and protective factors and interventions available for female youth involved in the JJ system:

- Since girls are more likely to be victims of maltreatment such as physical or sexual abuse, early interventions for girls enrolled in the child welfare system are crucial.
- More interventions are needed to identify girls at-risk for school-related problems such as low attendance, or those that display other risk factors such as having parents who are involved with the criminal justice system.
- Interventions focusing on young women must address their changing needs and target partner selection and the elimination of violence in relationships – both of which are important issues faced by young women transitioning out of JJ.
- Resources should focus on building on existing EBPs rather than on developing new interventions. The researchers have found that family-based interventions for JJ youth show promise.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This review has identified several ways in which girls' delinquency differed from that of boys. In particular, they noted the importance of the family context for girls, including maltreatment and exposure to caregiver transitions, as well as positive elements of the family context, such as parental warmth and effective monitoring. Peer context is also an important risk factor, with those that are involved in the JJ system more likely to choose males as their closest friend or partner. Girls in JJ are more likely than their male counterparts to be experiencing mental health disorders. They are also more likely to participate in risky sexual practices.

Rather than assuming that what works for boys automatically holds true for girls, a gender-based analysis on EBPs ensures that the unique needs of JJ-involved girls are duly met. The research also highlights the importance of measuring the outcomes of interventions using controlled randomized trials, since most of the existing practices have not been properly evaluated, or have even been shown to worsen antisocial behaviour. It is important then, for youth workers to consider the interventions that have been proven to be helpful to youth, and to build on such programs.



Leve, L. D., Chamberlain, P., & Kim, H. K. (2015). Risks, outcomes, and evidence-based interventions for girls in the US juvenile justice system. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 18(3), 252-279.