

Chapter One

A Contemporary Crisis?

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Two runaway schoolgirls took over a pensioner's home in Manchester, covered her walls in graffiti, bandaged her face so tightly that she choked, then pushed her body through the streets in a wheelie [rubbish] bin and dropped it into a canal.

—Rebecca Fowler, *The Guardian*, 12 July 1999

Four young women beat a 17-year-old girl with gardening tools to warn her off a boy she was seeing. She suffered minor injuries. Police said, "These girls are known for hanging around the area."

—"Crimestoppers," *The West Australian*, 17 July 1998

Just what is going on? Does the new freedom that women have rightly gained include the freedom to act as foully as men?

—Paul Barker, *Evening Standard*, 1 May 1996

Some girls now carry guns. Others hide razor blades in their mouth. . . . The plague of teen violence is an equal-opportunity scourge.

—C. Leslie et al., *Newsweek*, 2 August 1993

Teenage girls are becoming more violent, with rising crime figures shattering the image of females as the gentler sex. Experts say it is the ugly side of the greater freedom and equality enjoyed by girls and young women today. Boys and girls are becoming similar.

—*Sunday Mail*, 27 July 1997

The idea for this book began in September 1998 when the editors met for the first time in Melbourne and realized that both had been researching attitudes toward, and work with, troubled and troublesome girls and young women for several years. Despite working on opposite sides of the world, we found that we shared identical concerns about the increasingly punitive attitudes that were being displayed toward these multiply disadvantaged but nevertheless resourceful young women by the criminal justice system and the media, based on what appeared to us to be spurious evidence of an increase in violent and disorderly behavior by this group. We both felt thwarted in our attempts to investigate this phenomenon by an absence of reliable information and a paucity of sound qualitative research. Although there are many texts on “youth and crime,” girls are rarely mentioned in these. Similarly, there are many texts concerned with “women and crime” which pay little attention to girls. This book represents our efforts to rectify this situation. It aims to bring together some of the best existing research from four English-speaking areas of the world (Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States) on the perceived increase in girls’ violence. It is a critical collection that seeks to challenge official definitions and media representations by asking such questions as:

- Has violence by girls really increased at the end of the twentieth century?
- Exactly what kind of behavior by girls is now classified as “violent” and has this classification changed?
- What is the process whereby girls’ behavior is criminalized and is this different for boys?
- How have attitudes toward girls’ behavior changed?
- How do different perspectives seek to explain the apparent increase in girls’ violence?
- In what contexts do girls behave violently?
- What are the links between violence by girls and the broader issues of the social construction and social control of adolescent femininities?

Definitions of the terms *girls*¹ and *violence* are each sufficiently contested to warrant chapters, if not complete books, in their own rights. Juxtaposing them in the title of this collection may seem to invite the immediate questions, “What do you mean by ‘girls’?” and “What do you mean by ‘violence’?” Much of this collection is focused on answering precisely those questions, but, as editors, it is incumbent to offer an explanation of what was in *our* minds when we chose the title. The remainder of

this introductory chapter will attempt to unravel some of the threads that have resulted in the construction of the “new” social category of “violent girls” in the four geographical regions we have identified. We aim to achieve this, first, by challenging official definitions of the “violence” committed by girls and, second, by examining the construction of “girlhood” and the ways in which girls “do femininities.”

The Unchallenged Statistics

The sort of newspaper reports with which we started this chapter are most often followed by stories drawing on evidence from official statistics of one form or another, and/ or stories of selected incidents. Police, court, and prison statistics are presented as “facts” about the incidence of crime and changing crime patterns. The writers of such reports are apparently unaware of the elementary cautions about the interpretation of crime statistics that would be familiar to any novice in criminology.

The reasons for the need for caution in interpreting official statistics are well documented. Gibbons (1982: 85) has noted that crime statistics “are among the most unreliable and questionable social facts.” Other analysts have shown that crime statistics may not so much disclose “facts” about “criminal acts” as they do changes in police policies and the political maneuvering of criminal justice agencies as a response to such issues as changes in management objectives, budget structures, and other organizational issues (Taylor 1999). However, “the traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (Benjamin 1955: 92 cited in Tait 1994: 60). Thus, official statistics are not necessarily “worthless” but rather they can provide valuable insights into the “organizational constraints and priorities of the criminal justice system” (Muncie 1999: 14). One of the purposes of this chapter is to challenge the interpretation of official statistics that underpins accounts of increasing girls’ violence. We begin with an overview of the observations about girls’ violence suggested by official statistics in Britain, Canada, the United States, and Australia before turning to consideration of alternative explanations and forms of analysis.

Media reports of girls’ violence most often draw upon selected statistics and particular interpretations of them to support their story. Before beginning a discussion of these statistics it needs to be noted that youth crime in general, and the crimes committed by young women in particular, are predominantly less serious property crimes. An Australian study found that between 1990 and 1996 most girls’ offending was minor, with half consisting of Good Order offenses (known as Public Order offenses

in Britain—offenses such as being “drunk and disorderly”) most (70 percent) of which were transit offenses (such as traveling without a ticket or having their feet on a seat) (Alder & Hunter 1999). The same study found that while there had been an increase (81 percent) in the number of criminal cases involving girls across this time period (compared to a 26 percent increase in boys’ offenses), most of this increase was accounted for by an increase in Good Order offenses (114 percent increase for girls).

In general, violent crimes account for a small proportion of all youth crimes and an even smaller proportion of crimes committed by young women (Muncie 1999: 15; Alder & Hunter 1999; Chesney-Lind 1997). In the United States in 1994, 3.4 percent of girls’ arrests were for serious crimes of violence (Chesney-Lind 1997: 39). In Victoria, Australia, Children’s Court statistics, which you would anticipate would reflect a higher proportion of serious offenses than police arrest statistics, indicate that violent offenses have consistently accounted for less than 10 percent of girls’ offending. Although this is a slightly higher percentage than for boys (7–8 percent), the absolute numbers for boys (around 450 offenses per year) is more than four times that for girls (around 100 offenses per year) (Alder & Hunter 1999), demonstrating the potential posed by the use of percentages to distort the presentation of the “facts.”

Further, girls account for a small proportion of all youthful violent crimes and this proportion has changed little across time. In the United States in 1985 girls accounted for 11 percent of all arrests of youth for serious violent offenses; by 1994 the figure was 14 percent (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1995, 222) (Chesney-Lind 1997: 39). Similarly, in Australia the proportion of youth violent offenses for which girls are responsible has remained relatively stable at around 20 percent (Alder & Hunter 1999).

At the same time, the broader statistical picture of youth violent offending across several Western nations indicates a rise in youthful violent crimes across the late 1990s. This observation applies to levels of robbery and assault offenses, but not to homicides, which have remained at relatively stable levels since the 1980s (Pfeiffer 1997; Cook, Leverett, & Mukherjee 1999). For example, Pfeiffer (1997: 20) presents data on trends for violent crimes in Germany that suggest a sharp increase in violent crimes among the fourteen to twenty-one age group beginning in 1991 through to 1995. In the Netherlands, for the twelve to eighteen year-old population the violent crime rate doubled from the beginning of the 1990s (Pfeiffer 1997: 22–23). In Finland, a similar trend is observed with an increase in violent crimes for the fifteen to twenty year-old population, particularly since 1993. In Britain, James (1995: 122–23) found an increase between 1987 and 1993 in the rates of violent offending by the ten to thir-

teen and fourteen to sixteen year-olds. Such statistics, suggesting an increase in youth violence generally, form a backdrop for speculation about increases in violent offending by young women.

Some statistics also suggest an increase in violent offending by young women in particular. In Victoria (Australia), an analysis of Children's Court statistics indicated a 52.9 percent (40.1 percent for boys) increase between 1990 and 1996 in crimes of violence for girls. An almost identical pattern can be found in data from the Children's Court in New South Wales. In the five year period between 1992–1993 and 1996–1997, assault among boys almost doubled, while for girls there was a three-fold increase in the level of assaults over the same period. Similarly, a study of robbery and assaults in Germany for the period 1993–1997 concluded that the increases in violence tended to be greater for girls than for boys. In Canada and the United States, where there is no overall increase in youthful violent offending, there is nevertheless a statistical indication of increasing levels of violent offending by young women (Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham, & Saunders 2000).

Media analyses tend to take such statistics at face value and use them to fuel speculation about “new” violent young women. However, such statistics are as much an indication of definitions of particular behaviors, and criminal or juvenile justice system responses to them and to particular individuals, as they are about the actions of young women. We turn now to an overview of some of the issues that need to be taken into account in interpreting official statistics and a consideration of alternative explanations.

What Constitutes, Officially, Violent Offending by Girls?

Most aggregate analyses of trends in official statistics tend to use very broad categories of offenses. In relation to increases in violent crimes by girls for example, the two categories often used as the basis of analysis are robbery and assault. These broad terms tend to invoke in the popular imagination some of the most feared of crimes: from the balaclava-headed, knife-wielding stranger who enters our home in the dark of night, to the random assault of our person as we go about our everyday business. However, a broad range of offenses is subsumed under these general categories, from the most serious armed robberies to minor assault with intent to rob, and an even greater breadth of action is deemed to *constitute* these offenses.

In an effort to clarify further the interpretation of statistical trends some researchers have attempted to investigate the more precise nature

of the crimes committed by girls that have resulted in charges for violent offenses. From their analysis of violent offenses in the youth court cases in Canada between 1991 and 1996, Doob and Sprott (1998: 185) concluded that for girls, as for boys, there had been "large increases in minor assaults and no increase in the most serious assaults."

Two Australian studies had similar findings. In Queensland, following media attention regarding increases in predatory girl violence, a more detailed analysis revealed that girls' violent offenses were of the "less serious" nature, frequently involving fights between girls in public spaces such as shopping centers (Beikoff 1996). In Victoria, a study of Children's Court statistics found that, of the 9 percent of girls' offenses that were offenses against the person, assaults comprised 39 percent. Of these, 33 percent involved assault of a police officer or a person assisting the police. In comparison, 13 percent of boys' assaults were committed against the police (Alder & Hunter 1999). On the face of it, it seems unlikely that girls are actually more likely to assault police than boys. Rather, these figures suggest the need to look more closely at the ways and circumstances in which the offense of assault against police is defined in practice.

Also in Victoria, Australia, Rechtman (2001) analyzed police descriptions of the events that formed the basis of charges against girls for assaults and for robberies for the period between 1993 and 1999. Almost no change was found in the sorts of violent crimes with which girls were charged, with the most common offense being the less serious charge of "unlawful assault." Further, there was very little discernible difference in the nature of the events leading to these charges as described in the police descriptions of the event. One shift, which we will return to discuss later in the chapter, was in the number of victims who were "professional care workers." Rechtman provides the following example of the events that most frequently led to a charge of unlawful assault:

The victim had been hassled by the offender for approximately five to six weeks prior to the assault. The harassment included telephone calls, and torment at school by offenders and unknown friends of the offender. The reason for the harassment was that the offender believed that the victim has been spreading rumours about her which were slanderous. The harassment climaxed with a minor assaulting which took place when the offender believed the victim had been insolent to the offender's mother. The assault consisted of approximately four punches with a closed fist, and the victim having her hair pulled. The victim's injuries included a

minor asthma attack, and one minor scratch on the face approximately 2 centimetres long on the left cheek. (Rechtman 2001: 43)

This account is very similar to accounts of girls' violence described in the chapters in this book. That is, most often they are of the less serious form of assault. Most often the victims are girls about the same age or younger who are known to the offenders, and the offense most often does not involve a weapon. In the United States, girls' assaults are more likely than boys' to involve other family members (Chesney-Lind 2001: 39,42).

Similar conclusions regarding the less serious nature of girls' violent offending were drawn from a study of robberies in Hawaii between 1994 and 1996. While the statistical data indicated an increase in robbery arrests involving girls, a more detailed analysis of the events leading to the charges found that this was the result of "less serious offences being swept into the system" (Chesney-Lind 2001: 42). The increase in robberies was predominantly accounted for by crimes that were characterized as, "slightly older youths bullying and 'hijacking' younger youths for small amounts of cash and occasionally jewelry" (Chesney-Lind 2001: 44).

Together these pieces of research from Canada, the United States, and Australia suggest that while statistical analyses of the broad categories of offending indicate an increase in girls' violent offending, more detailed analyses of the forms and nature of that offending indicate that this increase is accounted for by more of the same, that is, the less serious forms of violent offending in which some girls have always been involved. As Horowitz and Pottieger (1991, 81) conclude from their Miami research, analyses of overall arrest rates can be deceptive and the complexity of the ways in which gender and race are involved in arrest decision making requires much more detailed analyses before we can draw meaningful conclusions from arrest statistics.

What Constitutes, in Self-Report Studies, Violent Offending by Girls?

Self-report studies are another form of research that can shed some light on the nature of girls' violent offending. Such studies were founded on the observation that official statistics as a measure of juvenile offending behavior were confounded by the juvenile justice responses to the behavior. They are intended to provide a measure of offending as reported by young people themselves.

In comparing the results of such studies with official statistics it has long been noted that official statistics tended to oversexualize and underreport girls' offending. That is, self-report studies suggested that offenses related to concerns regarding sexual behavior tended to be overrepresented in official statistics, and girls engaged in more criminal offending, including less serious assaults, than was recorded in official statistics. Chesney-Lind (2001: 39) observes that "self-report data, particularly from the 1970s and 1980s, always have shown higher involvement of girls in assaultive behaviour than official statistics would indicate." For example, Campbell (1981) found that 89 percent of sixteen-year-old girls in her study had been involved in at least one physical fight. Further, contrary to the conclusions drawn from official statistics that violent offending by girls is *increasing*, Chesney-Lind (2001: 39) reports that a self-report study in the United States "revealed significant *decreases* in girls' involvement in felony assaults, minor assaults, and hard drugs, and no change in a wide range of other delinquent behaviours—including felony theft, minor theft, and index delinquency."

Self-report studies are not without their problems (Muncie 1999: 20) but they do indicate that a good deal of the "crime" committed by young people does not result in arrest. Consequently, changes in arrest statistics may not so much represent changes in young women's behavior as changes in responses to that behavior.

Shifting Definitions and Responses

Central to any interpretation of official statistics is consideration of the ways in which the categories are defined and understood. From their extensive review of the literature on "female adolescent aggression," Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham, and Saunders (2000: 8) observe that "what all studies suggest, however, is that estimating the rates for youth violence and gender is complicated by the definition of what is considered violent."

Juvenile justice legislation in the United States, Canada, England, and Australia has undergone extensive change in recent years. Potentially, these changes have had an impact on the definitions and processing of youth crime and thus on the patterns of youth crime as reflected in official statistics, including the increase in violent crimes committed by girls. A thrust of many of these changes has been to separate the handling of welfare matters or "status" offenses (that is, "offenses" that pertain only to young people under a certain age and

relate to their own well-being, such as “runaway,” “incorrigible,” and “in need of care and protection”) from criminal offenses. It has been suggested that as a consequence of such reforms, girls’ actions that might previously have been dealt with as a “welfare” matter or a “status offense” are now processed as criminal offenses (see, for example, Worrall 2000).

In Australia such a practice has been postulated as having some impact on the official statistics regarding girls’ offending in Queensland (Beikoff 1996). An analysis of violent offenses indicated that, as previously mentioned, they were predominantly of a “less serious” nature and, in a third of the cases, the police were named as victim. The author ponders whether this indicates that common public order offenses for juveniles—obscene language, resisting arrest, and assaulting police—are replacing the “care and protection” applications of the past. It has also been suggested in Australia that the more limited availability of “care applications” as a response to girls’ unruly behavior has meant that girls involved in incidents, or “acting out” in welfare placements or foster care, are now being charged with criminal offences such as property damage, with subsequent bail refusal, guilty plea, and control orders, resulting in the girl being characterized as a “serious offender” (Alder 1998a). Such a scenario may be an explanation for Rechtman’s (2001) finding of an increase in the number of “unlawful assaults” in which the victim was a “professional carer.”

In the United States, Chesney-Lind (2001) also argues that the re-labeling of behaviors that were once categorized as status offenses into violent offenses cannot be ruled out as an explanation for the observed statistical increase in girls’ violence and may also reflect changes in the criminal justice system’s handling of domestic violence. Noting that girls’ aggression is often in the home or “intra-family” and therefore traditionally less likely to be reported to authorities, she suggests that increasing awareness of, and changing practices in relation to, domestic violence in recent years may have contributed to the increasing levels of girls’ arrests for violence. Chesney-Lind (2001: 42) cites the findings of two studies that provide some evidence in support of this suggestion. In one of these studies of “person-to-person” offenses by girls referred to Maryland’s juvenile justice system in 1994, virtually all were “assaults,” about half of which were “family centered.” Similarly a more recent California study of girls’ assault charges found that most were the result of “non-serious, mutual combat with parents” (Chesney-Lind 2001: 42).

As this research makes evident, it is not only changing legal definitions that impact on the defining of girls’ actions. Parents, teachers,

welfare workers, and neighbors have always played a significant part in the defining of girls' behavior as unacceptable and bringing it to the attention of the welfare and juvenile justice systems. For example, Chesney-Lind (2001: 42) suggests that an increase in girls' arrests for robbery in Honolulu may have resulted from changes in school policy and parental attitudes, since many of the offenses occurred as the youths were traveling to and from school, and the victims were peers who were robbed of small amounts of cash and occasionally jewelry.

In Australia, Hancock (1980) found that parents are responsible for bringing their child to the attention of police in a far higher proportion of female than male cases (21 percent compared with 1 percent of boys). Similarly, in England, Gelsthorpe (1986: 139) observed that police were "inundated with requests from parents for officers to go and speak to their 'difficult' children. The majority of these requests . . . came from parents who were concerned about the difficult behaviour of their daughters." In developing their case, police will also draw upon the reports of other people who have had contact with the young women such as teachers, welfare workers, and doctors. Thus, Carrington (1993) has argued, the policing of young women is not only a function of police officers, but is also the responsibility of a range of other people in their environment.

Thus, shifts in definitions of young women's actions as unacceptable or even violent can be brought about not only by legislative or policy changes, but by cultural shifts in understandings of either what is acceptable behavior on the part of girls or what constitutes a violent offense worthy of reporting to police. It is, therefore, important to recognize that the apparent statistical increase in girls' violence may be accounted for, at least in part, by (a) increased visibility of girls' violence, (b) increased categorization of girls' unacceptable behavior as "violence" and/or (c) inappropriate use of percentages to distort increases from a very low initial base (after all, an increase from 1 to 2 is an increase of 100 percent, whereas an increase from 100 to 120 is an increase of only 20 percent!). All these factors will potentially have an impact on recorded crimes and, as the following section seeks to argue, on the answers to two more theoretical questions:

- Under what material and ideological conditions are girls required to "do femininities" in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States?
- What resources are available to girls to perform nonpassive femininities and in what ways do they utilize these in their daily routines?

Constructing Girlhood

Kathleen Daly (1997,37) has asked the seemingly rhetorical question:

Would the claim that crime is a “resource for doing femininity”—for women and girls “to create differences from men and boys or to separate from all that is masculine”—have any cultural resonance? Probably not.

Our view, five years on, is that the answer may now be a very tentative “Yes” (see Jody Miller and Norman White in chapter 9). Daly’s concern is that, in theorizing crime within a framework of “doing gender” or “situated accomplishment” (West & Zimmerman 1987) there is the danger of employing a spurious sex/gender symmetry (or engaging in what Worrall [2002] refers to as the “search for equivalence”). Nevertheless, the evidence provided in this collection suggests that girls growing up in particular material conditions of existence—far from trying to be *more like boys*—are routinely looking for ways of claiming (or reclaiming—see Godfrey’s descriptions of “rough girls” a century ago, in chapter 2) the “resources” of youth in order to demonstrate their *difference* from boys. That the practices that result from this can only be conceptualized and responded to as crime (a concept that is always-already gender-laden as a resource for “doing masculinities”) is indicative of the restrictive discourses within which girls are required to accomplish adolescent femininities.

More specifically, our reading of the essays in this collection leads us to argue that, wherever girls fail to accomplish the approbated adolescent femininities of scholastic achievement and/or domestic docility, their alternative behaviors are constructed no longer in terms of emotional “neediness” but in terms of “crime”—and, in particular, in terms of “disorder” and “violence.” There is little tolerance of youthful female resistance, no indulgent acceptance that “girls will be girls.” Girls who occupy public spaces (see Jenny Pearce in chapter 7), celebrate racial and cultural differences (see Sheila Batacharya in chapter 4), prioritize loyalty to female friends (see Michele Burman in chapter 5), express their sexualities (see Laurie Schaffner in chapter 6) and are generally boisterous and rebellious, are defined as *threat*, as being *violent*. They are being *like boys* (see Anne Worrall in chapter 3). The only socially approved alternative resources available to girls are those from within the discourses of *victimization*. Girls who are the *survivors* of nonsexual and sexual physical and emotional abuse have permission to be “damaged” and even to “retaliate” within circumscribed limits. Girls who adopt a

victim identity may be afforded greater leniency when their behavior is considered disorderly or violent, but girls who “take risks” or embark on dubious “adventures,” especially in groups, put themselves beyond the reach of positive description. Being “nondescript” (literally, “not easily classified”—see Worrall 1990) these girls are *muted*. And, as Ardener (1978: 21) famously said:

The theory of mutedness . . . does not require that the muted be actually silent. They may speak a great deal. The important issue is whether they are able to say all that they would wish to say, where and when they wish to say it. Must they, for instance, re-encode their thoughts to make them understood in the public domain? Are they able to think in ways which they would have thought had they been responsible for generating the linguistic tools with which to shape their thoughts? If they devise their own code will they be understood?

The ways in which girls talk about their experiences of violence are often not “re-encoded” in ways that are readily understood and accepted by dominant groups in society (see Burman in chapter 5).

But, as Batacharya argues in chapter 4, the concept of “violent girls” is a construct of white, middle-class culture. Girls of color (whether indigenous or nonindigenous) are constructed as always-already “violent,” regardless of their presenting behavior. They are always-already a threat, regardless of their scholastic achievement or domestic docility. For them, we would argue, the only alternative discourse resides within exotica. “Oriental” girls may be viewed as “cute but deadly” (see Worrall in chapter 3). Girls of color who fail to be alluring in this way are routinely assumed to be verbally and physically aggressive.

Aboriginal girls in Australia and African American girls in the United States fare particularly badly in the juvenile justice systems in both countries. In Australia, although indigenous youth comprised approximately 2.6 percent of the youth population, in June 1996 they made up 36 percent of all juveniles held in juvenile detention centers (Atkinson 1996: 3). One study reports that “in one state 77% of inmates in maximum security institutions for juvenile girls were Aboriginal” (Paxman 1993: 156). In the United States the weight of evidence suggests that African American girls are treated more harshly than their European American counterparts at all stages of the juvenile justice system. In terms of policing, Visher found the influence of race and age on arrest decisions was greater for female than male suspects (Visher 1983: 15). Further, African American females represent the fastest

growing category of young people adjudicated for delinquent offenses (Girls Incorporated 1996: 20).

Both historical and contemporary research indicates that understanding of African American women as “strong and threatening” (Rafter 1985: 143) and “dominant and nagging” (Daly & Stephens 1995: 204) has informed correctional and court officials punitive responses. A more punitive response to African American girls was evident in Miller’s Los Angeles study of probation decision making. Miller (1996: 233) concluded that middle-class African American girls were more likely to receive a detention-oriented placement, while poor white girls were more likely to be recommended to an explicitly treatment-oriented facility. It was in the discursive frameworks of the justifications for these recommendations that Miller found “the most striking differences in the framing of delinquent girls by race” (1996: 235). As a general pattern she observed that “paternalistic discursive frameworks were frequently called upon to explain the behaviour of white and Latina girls, while punitive constructs were more likely to be used to describe African-American girls” (Miller 1996: 239).

In Australia, Pettman notes different versions of femininity and sexuality are portrayed in racialized stereotypes so that “Aboriginal women may be portrayed as loose and easy, and Asian women as sexually exotic, passive and used to male domination” (Pettman 1992: 74). Kerry Carrington has argued that for Aboriginal girls, their gender and their Aboriginality as constructed in a discourse of sexuality, constitute their public visibility as somehow “harmful to the local community” (an oft-quoted phrase in court records) (Carrington 1990: 8). Consequently, their public behavior is more closely policed than that of white girls. The blending of discourses of sexuality, race, and gender was also apparent in the frequent reports by Aboriginal girls of the use by police of such terms as “black sluts,” “black bitches,” and “black moles” in their interactions with Aboriginal girls (Cunneen 1990).

What It Means to Be a Girl

Christine Alder (1998b: 96) urges:

We have yet to explore the multiple constructions of femininities and sexualities, their relationship to understandings of girlhood, and their implications for the experiences of girls of differing class and race backgrounds in the juvenile justice system.

Given that “girlhood is produced in the practices in which girls are regulated” (Walkerdine 1993: 15), are we in a position to participate in a reworking of what it means to be a girl in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century? This collection attempts to address a number of the dimensions of that experience by exploring: media representations of girls’ behavior and criminal justice responses to it; girls’ presence in public space; girls’ definitions of violence and their relationships to it; girls’ relationships with each other and their behavior in groups.

Barry Godfrey (chapter 2) demonstrates that many contemporary concerns about the behavior of girls are by no means “new” concerns. Using oral evidence, newspaper trial reports, and statistical data, he shows how, in England and in Australia and New Zealand, the deceptively low number of prosecutions for violence by girls in the 1880–1930 period mask the active participation of working girls in street gangs and public brawls. But arresting a girl was not “a good collar” for a constable and might invite ridicule from colleagues, so few appeared in official statistics. Even a century ago it was clear that it was attitudes toward a girl’s behavior, rather than the behavior itself, that dictated the extent to which it was made visible. It was not that girls did not engage in risk-taking behavior but it was their risky *sexual* behavior that created more anxieties among respectable citizens than their propensity for drunken brawling. (In contrast, one might argue that, with sexual behavior being less risky a century later—at least in terms of pregnancy and *some* sexually transmitted diseases—it is the propensity for drunken brawling that causes more alarm).

Anne Worrall (chapter 3) examines the evidence that media representations of girls’ violence have both reflected and reinforced changing official responses to troublesome girls. Noting the discrepancy between declining overall rates of juvenile female offending and increasing rates of incarceration of girls, she attributes the latter to changing perceptions of the *threat* posed by girls’ presence in public spaces and the reconstruction of girls’ friendship groups as “girl gangs.” While the application of actuarial justice continues to assess girls as a “low risk” category, ideological pressure to render them “auditable” has resulted in the creation of “violent girls” as a penal category to which increasing numbers of disorderly “ladettes” can be assigned.

If Anne Worrall argues that traditional assessments of girls as “low risk” in terms of criminality have been replaced by assessments of them as “high risk underclass youth” (who just happen to be female), then Sheila Batacharya (chapter 4) argues powerfully that “girl violence is an empty concept.” Analyses of girls’ violence routinely

neglect issues of racism, ableism, and heterosexism. When Reena Virk was murdered, the media attributed the violence to a freak failure of gender socialization, to girls being uncharacteristically aggressive. But these were *white* girls attacking a South Asian girl; these were attractive girls attacking a “plain” and “overweight” girl; these were “sexy” girls attacking a lonely, unhappy girl who made false claims about having boyfriends. The femininities that were being played out in this scenario were too complex to be reduced to a mono-causal explanation. What was being reenacted here was a brutal colonialism that constructed “immigrants” as inferior and “immigrant girls” as a “servant” class to be punished for having the audacity to think themselves deserving of relationships with superior white males. This was no “girl-on-girl” violence, but white girls protecting white boys from the insult of being the subjects of black girls’ fantasies and competing with black girls for the affections of white boys.

In chapter 5, Michele Burman reports on research into girls’ own definitions of, and attitudes toward, violence in Glasgow, Scotland. In their “turbulent talk,” girls’ definitions of violence are fluid. “Violence” is denounced when it is physically *and* verbally aggressive behavior which cannot be justified; it is acceptable when the social context justifies it—when it is a reaction to insult or humiliation or when it involves “standing up” for self or close friends and family. Girls are all too familiar with violence and have to make sense of it routinely in their lives. But they do not often resort to its use themselves and, when they do, it is rarely “senseless.” It is contextualized, analyzed, and explained within girls’ complex, and sometimes contradictory, moral discourses.

In chapter 6, Laurie Schaffner also calls for violence by girls to be contextualized. She is more ready than some other contributors to accept that violent behavior by girls has increased (in North America) but argues that this can only be understood through the concept of “community violence” and the gendered impact of this on the daily lives of girls. This is not to argue that violent girls are always direct victims of violence themselves, though this is often the case. Rather, Schaffner argues that we need to explore the extent to which girls absorb or internalize the devaluing messages of domestic violence, routine misogyny, homophobia, and sexual harassment. Schaffner draws our attention to the blurred boundary between girls as perpetrators of violence and girls as victims, survivors, or witnesses of violence.

If Burman and Schaffner urge us to listen to girls’ voices and contextualize their violence, then Jenny Pearce explores, in chapter 7, the resourcefulness of girls (in London) in dealing with routine violence and their strategic use of public space to reduce the restrictions on their

movement imposed at home. Breaking free from overcrowded and sometimes abusive home environments, Pearce found that girls use streets, estate stairways, and landings to gain knowledge of, and participate in, routine violence and disorder. At times they are actively involved but, more often, they learn to avoid it or negotiate noninvolvement. This is all part of a complex, and historical, engagement of girls in "street life" (as Barry Godfrey demonstrates in chapter 2). Often it is no more than "roughness" or "nuisance"—risky play, testing the boundaries; sometimes it turns into something nastier; sometimes more vulnerable young women become the victims of violence and exploitation themselves. If we read Pearce's contribution aright, she urges us not to perceive "violent" girls as somehow "different" from "nonviolent" girls. Violence inheres in the everyday life of many girls—to be "played with," tested, avoided, negotiated with, and, occasionally, indulged in. Until we understand more about the complexities of gendered street life, we will be unable to explain or situate apparently violent and disorderly behavior by girls.

Sibylle Artz confirms, in chapter 8, that much of the behavior by girls that is classified as "violent" takes place at school. Reporting on a school-based violence prevention program, she notes the greater receptivity of girls to such programs and, though using a different terminology, reinforces the arguments of other contributors that girls' violence emerges from experiences that are different from those of boys and that girls set their own violent behavior in a context of moral judgments. Girls who utilize physical and verbal violence, Artz argues, have a disproportionate experience of violence in their own lives and view themselves through the "hegemonic male gaze," internalizing male expectations of women and judging their own worth by male standards.

Many of the themes that run throughout this collection are summarized and theorized in the final chapter (chapter 9) by Jody Miller and Norman White. Exploring the complexities of girls' use of gender resources in the male-dominated urban street scene, they demonstrate that, while violence may, in some situations, be a resource for girls to accomplish gender, there are many situations in which girls use gender as a resource to negotiate with or avoid participation in violence (as either a victim or a perpetrator). The context of girls' violence on the street, in groups and gangs, is always one of gender power inequalities. Whether engaging in the instrumental violence required for robbery or the symbolism of gang violence, it is power imbalance and sexual double standards that dictate the agenda.

The contributions in this collection are written from differing disciplinary and geographical perspectives. They contain contradictory evidence and, at times, conflicting views. But the common concerns

are clear, as is the common commitment to the adventure of excavating the continuities and discontinuities in the struggles of girls and young women to take control of their own lives and futures in material and ideological conditions that continue to restrict their options and opportunities.

Notes

1. We use the term *girls* partly to distinguish teenagers from "older" young women and because the term *young women* tends to mask this younger age group. We also use the term out of respect for the move by some girls to reclaim their power as girls and give the word a new and nontraditional connotation (see Alder 1998).

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