

INTRODUCTION

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A decade into the twenty-first century, it seems like the news about girls is increasingly alarming. Of course, we've always had "bad" girls. Longfellow, no less, penned, that "when she was good she was very good indeed, and when she was bad, she was horrid" (Longfellow, 2004). In the waning decades of the twentieth century, though, the public was jolted by media images of "gangster" girls, every bit as menacing as their urban male counterparts, often pictured glaring at the world over the barrel of a gun. The new century also introduced us to suburban "mean" girls, manipulating and backstabbing their way to popularity, and now, only a few years later, it seems as though our mean girls have suddenly turned violent. YouTube videos of brawling cheerleaders make local and national news and "go viral" on the Web where they are viewed by thousands. Do we really need to worry about girls causing "savagery in the suburbs" (Meadows & Johnson, 2003: 37), as a 2003 headline in *Newsweek* warned? It would certainly seem so if you picked up recent trade books like *See Jane Hit* (Garbarino, 2006) and *Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice* (Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2005), which purport to advise parents and teachers on what to do about girls' violence while also fueling public unease about modern girlhood.

Given the high level of public and academic interest in girls' use of violence and aggression, it is actually remarkable that so little careful academic work has been made available to those concerned with the facts and not the hype. This book fills this void by making two major contributions to the discussion of girls' aggression and violence. One is to challenge the widely accepted notion that girls are "more violent" than in the past—a perception that has largely fueled the media panic about "girls gone wild." These panics about girls' violence are not only ungrounded, but are also potentially quite harmful for poor girls of color. The most punitive consequences of this twenty-first-century crackdown on violent girls is likely to be felt most by girls who live in heavily policed urban neighborhoods and attend troubled inner-city schools that enforce "zero-tolerance" policies. Using a wide variety of empirical sources, this book lays out data that demonstrates how changes in the policing of girlhood and changes in girls' structural and situational

circumstances, rather than essential changes in girls' behavior, largely explains the significant increases in girls arrests, particularly for simple assault.

This book challenges the simplistic and somewhat contradictory notion that girls use of violence is somehow inherent in their personalities and a product of them becoming "more like boys" in the new millennium. We offer a number of chapters that challenge the notion that supporting girls' efforts to seek equality in sports or in the classroom—that is, encouraging their efforts to seek and maintain equality with men and boys—will somehow produce unintended consequences like equity in crime. We present cutting-edge research on the contexts that encourage violent behavior among girls, and we show that addressing the unique problems that confront girls in various settings, such as in dating relationships, in damaged families, in school hallways and classrooms, and in distressed urban neighborhoods could go a long way to reducing girls' use of violence. Thus, rather than framing girls and their behavior as "the problem," the chapters in this book focus on how social settings shape girls' responses to potential threats of violence and victimization and the often punitive institutional response to girls' actions. The chapters also highlight the importance of the backgrounds of girls who have used violence. Often using girls' own voices, the authors discuss how and why girls came to use violence in certain situations. These chapters encourage us to pay attention to the degree of trauma found in girls' pasts, as well as the high levels of violence in their families, neighborhoods, and schools, all of which combine to produce girls who use violence in these settings. Many of the poor, young women of color whose voices are featured in the pages of this volume explain very powerfully how the situations they found themselves in encouraged their use of violence; their stories stand in contrast to popular media images that repeatedly construct female victims as white, middle-class suburban girls who have "gone wild."

In pulling this book together, we, as the editors, have drawn on a number of distinct theoretical traditions, but two predominate. The first tradition is that of feminist criminology, particularly that strand of feminist criminology that insists on the importance of "intersectionality" (Morash & Chesney-Lind, 2006; Burgess-Proctor, 2006; Potter, 2006). This phrase foregrounds the ways that race, gender, and class intersect in the lives of all women, but particularly the lives of criminalized girls and women. Such a perspective reminds us that all women have a race, gender, and class position (among others) that informs their actions and the various institutional and interpersonal responses to their actions. This tradition is central to understanding both the contexts that give rise to girls' violence as well as the use of violence itself. The second key theme is that of "voice" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Brown, 2003). This is the notion that creating a space for girls to be heard is a central part of the enterprise of good feminist scholarship. The importance of hearing girls' voices directs feminist scholars in the area of girls' studies to rely on methods that showcase and capture, in girls' own

words and to the greatest degree possible, perspectives on issues of violence, relationships, victimization, and resistance. A number of chapters in this book do this quite powerfully. Finally, the book relies on constructionist and critical criminologies that focus attention on the importance of the media not only in constructing images of crime, but also in creating moral panics that encourage a harshly punitive response to crime (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978; Jenkins, 1998).

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The first aim of this book is to review, using the best data available, trends in girls' violence. In the book's opening two chapters, authors Mike Males, Eve Buzawa, and David Hirschel explore this important issue in different ways. These chapters provide new ways of understanding girls' use of violence by using sophisticated arrest data that gives us specific information on both the context of the offense and the characteristics of victims. Chapter 1 by Mike Males entitled "Have 'Girls Gone Wild?'" sets the stage by reviewing key data presented on the actual trends in girls' violence. Males notes that at a time in which every reliable measure of crime and victimization shows girls are less violent and victimized today, we see a massive campaign by professionals, scholars, institutions, and the media to brand girls as "wild," "mean," and violent. Males explores the "pop psychology" and "pop culture" dimensions of this contemporary anti-girl campaign, and explains how today's "girls' violence" hoax, and the rush by major interests to embrace it, reflects a major breakdown in our society's capacity to analyze and design rational policies for young people, particularly adolescent girls.

In chapter 2, "Criminalizing Assault," Eve Buzawa and David Hirschel present new research on the impact of mandatory arrests in the area of domestic violence, particularly focusing on police bias and its role in the arrests of young people. For the first time, and with considerably more precision regarding what arrests for crimes of violence actually entail, the authors examine the question of whether or not assaults on adults by youth are particularly criminalized. The authors' profile of arrest trends clearly demonstrates that girls are far more likely to be arrested for simple assaults in these incidents, as opposed to more serious assaults. Buzawa and Hirschel also find that girls' assaults are less likely to involve injury or weapons than boys' assaults, and that girls (and boys) who are suspected of hitting their parents are far more likely to be arrested than their adult counterparts. Taken together, these two studies document how changes in criminal justice policies, namely, mandatory arrests for domestic violence, have increased youth exposure to criminal justice sanctions.

The next chapter by Chesney-Lind on the jailing of girls focuses on the sobering fact that we are now arguably in the self-fulfilling-prophecy stage of the hype about "violent" girls detailed in Males' chapter. Here we see a

split in the popular treatment of girls violence: we care deeply about saving middle-class “mean” girls from themselves and their peers while shrugging off the consequences of harshly punitive juvenile and criminal justice policies that target poor girls of color and their families. These changing policies have led to increases in the arrests and incarceration of African American girls for violent offenses. A look at the data reveals that not only have girls’ arrests for crimes of violence increased, while the number for boys stayed level or dropped, we are also seeing dramatic increases in referrals to court of girls charged with “person” offenses. This increased incarceration is deeply racialized, with African American and Native American girls disproportionately incarcerated for person offenses. This is just one consequence of the present-day panic about violent girls. Resources are funneled into suburban schools for gender-based conflict resolution sessions, while poor girls of color in urban settings continue to be arrested and incarcerated for their use of aggression or violence. Imagine in what rational world would more girls than boys be in court populations charged with violent offenses, and yet that was precisely the case in 2003, the last year for which we have data, when 26% of girls were in court populations charged with person offenses, compared to 23% of boys (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Similar trends are observed in sentencing, with dramatic increases in the detention and imprisonment of girls, again with no similar increase in boys’ imprisonment. Of course, popular debates about increasingly violent girls make no mention of either the conditions that led to violence or the disparate criminal consequences experienced by girls in different settings.

In short, these chapters document that a careful reading of the best available data does not support arguments that girls today are far more violent than their counterparts in earlier decades. Instead, all the available evidence points to policy changes, most specifically the dramatic shift in the treatment of domestic violence incidents, but also other policy shifts such as “zero-tolerance” policies toward fighting in schools that are producing increasing arrests of girls. The most severe consequences of these shifts are felt most by poor girls of color, since data clearly indicate that such girls, particularly African American girls, are dramatically overrepresented in detention centers and training schools. Once these girls enter the system, they tend to stay in the system, despite fairly clear evidence that in previous decades their behavior would not have warranted a criminal justice response, much less an arrest. The popular concern regarding girls distracts our attention from these important policy shifts and the resulting consequences. Though we are not seeing a dramatic increase in girls’ violence, we are witnessing a dramatic shift in criminal justice responses to girls’ behavior. We are not seeing the emergence of the new violent girl, but we are seeing dramatic increases in the arrest, detention, and incarceration of girls for person offenses. In essence, the nation is embarking on a massive and unnecessary increase in the incarceration of girls—one with enormous racial and gender

consequences, based largely on an increase in girls' arrests that are fueled by policy changes rather than a real increase in girls' violence.

Having established this empirical reality, we turn to a consideration of the context of girls' violence. These chapters reveal how girls' violence is inextricably tied to the contexts and settings within which girls live out their lives. Girls have not become more violent, but for some girls, the conditions in which they come of age are, in many cases, more distressed, more isolated, and, in turn, more violent than is commonly understood. Girls who live in distressed urban areas witness and experience far more violence in their everyday lives than their suburban, middle-class counterparts. Girls who come of age in isolated inner-city neighborhoods share an increased vulnerability to gender-specific violence, including dating violence, harassment, and sexual assault. Adolescent girls who come of age within these structural-cultural contexts, which are deeply influenced by race, gender, and class, are pressured to make choices about how to "survive" in settings where their survival is not guaranteed. These girls face serious dilemmas that most of their middle-class counterparts—white or African American—rarely encounter. In the next section of this book, *Girls' Violence: Institutional Contexts and Concerns*, we highlight the social and psychological consequences of girls' exposure to violence in various settings, as well as their responses to their increased vulnerability in these settings.

Thus, after effectively critiquing the myths about "violent girls," part 2, "Contextualizing Girls' Violence and Aggression," shifts our attention to the specific contexts within which girls are likely to encounter violence, including schools, neighborhoods, and intimate relationships. Each of the authors in this section challenge simplistic notions of girls' violence and reveal the racialized, gendered, and classed dimensions of girls' experiences with violence along with the cultural, institutional, and individual responses to "violent" girls.

In the first chapter in the section, chapter 4, "The Gendering of Violence and Sexuality in Intimate Relationships: How Violence Makes Sex Less Safe for Girls," Melissa E. Dichter, Julie A. Cederbaum, and Anne M. Teitelman explore the often-hidden experiences of girls in violent dating relationships. Specifically, they push back against notions that boys and girls are equally "violent" as some studies contend. They argue that one must examine how the threat of physical and psychological violence and unequal gendered power dynamics in girls' intimate relationships may increase girls' risk of violence and potential for contracting serious sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. The authors argue powerfully that the "normal" dating script disempowers girls vis-à-vis boys, and exposes them to forms of partner violence and sexual coercion that most measures of dating violence have never considered.

In chapter 5, Chesney-Lind, Morash, and Irwin critically review the literature on relational aggression, which has been the key literature that

produced the “mean girl” imagery and hype. They argue that research to date does not necessarily support the notion that such aggression is the exclusive province of girls; indeed, they find rather convincing evidence that while girls’ display the behavior earlier than boys (who are as children more likely to engage in physical aggression or violence), that changes by late adolescence when boys close the gap. More importantly, they argue that those who engage in non-violent, social aggression do not necessarily have other social problems (meaning that they do not also experience problems in school or at home). Finally, they argue that since relational aggression is not predictive of physical aggression or violence, it should not be folded into notions of “bullying,” which many schools have done.

The next chapter in this section illuminates the meanings of violence in the lives of girls whose behavior is more likely to be sanctioned by police officers than school counselors. In “‘I don’t know if you consider that as violence . . .’: Using Attachment Theory to Understand Girls’ Perspectives on Violence,” Judith A. Ryder uses the narratives of 24 adolescent girls adjudicated for an assault or robbery to examine the interpersonal and context-dependent nature of their violence. Ryder uses an “attachment perspective” to explain how young women’s physical violence develops under adverse conditions as an attempt to coerce others into meeting attachment needs; later developing the use of aggression or violence as an adaptive response in harsh social environments.

Chapter 7, “Reducing Aggressive Behavior in Adolescent Girls by Attending to School Climate,” by Sibylle Artz and Diana Nicholson, examines how interactions in institutional settings can produce cultural contexts that inhibit the use of aggression or violence. The authors use thematic and statistical analysis of data from a five-year, longitudinal research project to demonstrate how group dynamics influence positive connections and engagement in school settings. Specifically, their analysis shows that smaller groupings in single-sex settings that support positive values, a sense of connection, and engagement with one’s school and one’s fellow students, where one need not fear attack or sexual harassment and has confidence that one will be supported and assisted with problem solving and the resolution of conflict, produce positive outcomes even for girls who are identified as high risk, aggressive, and violent.

Still staying in key settings for girls, in chapter 8 Marion Brown considers the effectiveness of “group homes,” a ubiquitous and somewhat under-researched setting within which girls who have problems at home and on the streets often find themselves “placed.” Brown notes that these settings, far from offering girls a safe haven from dangerous families and streets, instead often encourage the very violence they seek to extinguish. Particularly problematic for the girls whose voices Brown lets us hear is their frustration with the constant and petty surveillance of their bodies and interactions in these settings, as well as the often arbitrary and demeaning rules that

characterize many of these facilities. Ultimately, even though she worked in these facilities herself, Brown is very concerned that the cumulative effect of the “micro-technologies” of surveillance, along with “pathologizing” and “individualizing” discourses, end up short changing and even harming the very girls the facilities are intended to help.

In the final section of the book, *Girls’ Violence: Explanations and Implications*, we shift our attention to how neighborhood settings influence girls’ use of violence. In “It’s about being a survivor . . .”: African American Girls, Gender, and the Context of Inner-City Violence,” Nikki Jones draws on data collected over years of ethnographic research in two urban settings—Philadelphia and San Francisco—to reflect on the strategies that African American, inner-city girls develop to navigate distressed urban neighborhoods and the gendered consequences of their doing so. Jones reveals that boys and girls who come of age in distressed urban neighborhoods develop a preoccupation with survival. Over time, girls come to recognize the three Rs of “the code of the street”—respect, reputation, and retaliation—which governs much of the violence in their neighborhoods. As Jones illustrates, inner-city girls understand at an early age that stray bullets do not discriminate between young and old, guilt and innocence, or boys and girls. Girls know that the settings of inner-city life, whether school buildings or row houses, neighborhood street corners or porch stoops, do not come with a special girls-only pass to live beyond the reach of violence. The need to avoid or overcome dangers throughout their adolescence presents a unique dilemma for girls who grow up in these neighborhoods. Jones situates African American, inner-city girls’ experiences at the center of her research in order to explain how girls reconcile the gendered dilemmas of inner-city adolescence, including how they develop situated survival strategies in between the competing and contradictory expectations of “good” and “ghetto” girls, and the limitations of these strategies when it comes to girls’ vulnerability to gender-specific violence, which remains a prevalent threat for adolescent girls who grow up in distressed urban neighborhoods.

In the penultimate chapter, “The Importance of Context in the Production of Older Girls’ Violence: Implications for the Focus of Intervention,” Merry Morash, Suyeon Park, and Jung-mi Kim use quantitative, longitudinal analysis to examine the relationship of the degree of violence in the community, school, and family contexts to subsequent violence by girls and their reported levels of hopelessness and depression. Finally, Walter DeKeseredy provides an important service to readers in his epilogue, by returning us to the ten-thousand-foot level, if you will, and discussing again core theoretical notions that undergird this collection. There is, first and foremost, the notion of a moral panic that fuels many crime waves, including the girl crime wave that has characterized entry into the new millennium. He also reminds us of the crucial role played by the criminal justice system in both creating and re-creating patriarchal control over girls and women,

and, finally, he reminds of us of the importance of context when discussing girls' and women's violence.

BEYOND DENIAL AND DEMONIZATION

Together, the chapters in this book demonstrate that the media hype about the problem of violent girls considerably exaggerates the situation we confront, and it misidentifies the source of the problem (often using misogynistic and racist arguments like the "masculinization" of African American girls). This book challenges media images of girls' violence that relies on both racialized and masculinized images to heighten racial stereotyping and gender trouble rather than exploring the empirical dimensions of the problem. The book also provides powerful evidence about the settings and situational contexts that encourage girls' use of violence. A review of these chapters provides very clear evidence that living in abusive families, attending dysfunctional schools, dating abusive men or boys, living in dangerous neighborhoods, and being housed in controlling group homes all combine to create girls' violence. Turning our attention to girls' "choices" in these contexts provides a clear roadmap in going forward. If we want to reduce girls' violence we have to challenge our cultural obsession with producing "good" girls who meet our cultural expectations of proper femininity. We must expand our attention beyond girls' aggressive or violent behaviors to include a deep concern about the families, schools, and neighborhoods in which girls find themselves. Serious efforts to change those settings are more likely to produce less violence, even among girls with long histories of delinquency.

As we reflect on the dramatic increases in the policing and ultimate incarceration of girls, particularly poor girls of color and often for less serious forms of violence (for example, simple assault), we are drawn to the conditions in the facilities in which girls are punished, which are themselves horrifically violent. As the numbers of girls in these institutions soar, we call for a wholesale reappraisal of those poorly crafted policies, such as mandatory arrest and zero tolerance, which have brought us to this place. Girls do not need more policing and punishment; instead they need policies that create and support safe families, positive and nurturing relationships, schools that teach rather than punish, and neighborhoods that do not traumatize and terrorize. We would all benefit from such an investment.

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