

**Is there an increase in women in the  
Youth Justice System right now?**

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## **Abstract**

This literature review studies the question ‘is there an increase in women in the youth justice system at the moment?’ It looks at current and historical literature to do with the Youth Justice System in the UK alone, these articles range as far back as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to articles published this year. There are several pieces of evidence and statistics to suggest the existence of a surge in girls up to the age of 18 going through the Youth Justice System, but there are also reviews of those statistics that show the country is subject to a large amount of moral panic, especially surrounding girl gangs and violent crime.

The two chapters clearly explore the different sides of the argument, yes and no. Different organisations and boards are taken into account when reviewing statistics, to bring in issues of over and under reporting in the press. Conclusive arguments state that although crime statistics show an increase there is less evidence to suggest that the increase is real, placing the moral panic on the propaganda of the media. It ends with some remarks and recommendations for the Youth Justice System.

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**This is dedicated to Granddad and Baby Jude.**

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## **Introduction**

The Youth Justice System (YJS) was first established in 1908 with the introduction of the Children Act. Since this time there have been many changes in the YJS. The changes are so that the YJS now deals with offenders ranging from ten to seventeen, both female and male.

Since Jack Straw set up a task force for Youth Justice there have been many changes, including the introduction of Youth Offenders Teams (YOTs), encompassing multi-agency working. The task force had to be focussed on making the YJS more streamlined and making it more effective in dealing with young offenders, getting them through the system quicker. The reason behind this stemmed from the government recognising the issue of the length of time it took a young offender to go through the system. In 1998 the Crime and Disorder Act identified that persistent young offenders were in custody for an average of 142 days. The government wanted to reduce this to 71 days. However, this initiative has positive and negative consequences. Along with these aims and many others, it was clear to see that YJS would have to take a very different approach to dealing with young offenders in order to reduce re-offending.

This study is focussed on women and whether the YJS has had to deal with more female offenders over the past 20 years. The history of YJS is widely available; however statistics relating to women are limited. The Youth Justice Board (YJB) Annual Report (1999) mentions females as a separate issue just once, where the annual reports from 2002-2004 recognise females as a different strand of statistics. These statistics are still very vague and the demographics of the reports are still

largely based on male offenders. Imagery, therefore, plays a significant part when discussing the young offender; they are usually viewed as being male and part of a gang. This is a stereotypical view of the young offender and is a label for many young men. For this purpose I will distinguish between female and male offenders. This review of current literature and statistics aims to find out if there has been an increase, or a decrease, in women going through the YJS. If either is the case, then the YOTs and other agencies need to be aware of this and the way in which their practices are affected.

Looking at statistics over the past five years it is clear to see that there has been an increase in women in the YJS, however a question that does have to be asked is, 'is this new wave of crime unaffected by history?.' Davies <sup>1</sup> identifies the women gangs that were operating in Manchester in the late Victorian era. With every rise in crime it is important to look into history to discover how it was dealt with at that time. It is quite possible that the issue was not addressed. This idea is something I will explore in depth later, mainly based in chapter two.

The YJB statistics from 2002/03<sup>2</sup> and 2003/04<sup>3</sup> show an increase in the numbers of women going through the YJS. This could be due to several factors. Political influences and styles of reporting affect the way that certain groups of people are portrayed. The reason for the increase could be due to the police and YJB focus changing to target females. It is highly likely that the way females are perceived in the justice system generally has changed. We no longer experience the idea of a

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<sup>1</sup> Davies, A. (1999) 'These viragoes are no less cruel than the lads' *British Journal of Criminology* Vol 39 No 1 Pp 72-89

<sup>2</sup> Youth Justice - Annual Statistics 2002/03, Youth Justice Board For England and Wales

<sup>3</sup> Youth Justice - Annual Statistics 2003/04, Youth Justice Board For England and Wales

'doubly deviant' female criminality. Females committing crime has become almost as regular as males committing crime. In the UK there has been an increase in the number of all female gangs in the main cities (a trend originally from the United States) and the amount of female young offenders steadily increases as the years go by. In the 2003/04 statistics the female population of the secure estates has hovered between 180 and 250, and there is an increase of offences committed. The 2002/03 report shows that 15.6% of offences were committed by females, in 2003/04 this had increased to 16.5%, an increase of over 5,500 offences. Court remands and disposals have also risen by similar percentages.

Although it is clear to see the increase, the reason behind the increase could have many contributing factors. Females commit different types of crime; these crimes have many reasons behind them. From those who shoplift to impress their friends/gang to those who are in white-collar crime with a many motives. Looking into these there are several issues surrounding the way female criminality is reported in today's society. Females are no longer the victims of crime but sometimes, the very violent, instigators. There has been a steady increase in women in prison between 1990 and 2002. Approximately 40% of the females in prison are there for theft. The little evidence that there is suggests that these figures filter down to the Young Offenders Institutes and the Secure Estate population. However the reasons for this may not be the same as those who are in adult prison.

With more females committing crime it is understandable to look at the culture that surrounds them. The idea of the 'ladette' culture that exists could be a contributing factor. Girls are subject to social and peer pressure just as much as boys, this could

be seen as a problem that could or could not need to be addressed in YJS. The system is yet to really accommodate girls who would rather act like boys. Where a simple answer would be to treat them like boys; it is yet to be seen if this is effective to any extent. The YOTs may need to identify the actual issues that are deeper rooted in female offending, by looking into the moral issues that are solidly entrenched within this is unavoidable. The older generations would assume that the younger generations live for an immoral lifestyle. Identifying the base of this immoral lifestyle could possibly help the YOTs and YJS to better deal with the issues they face daily. The morality of the current generation has changed, but are we now too lenient on offenders even after Tony Blair's 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' speech in 1997.

Currently there is less of a stigma attached to females than males. One website, [www.crimeinfo.org.uk](http://www.crimeinfo.org.uk), points out that a female young offender will 'grow out of crime' more successfully than a boy. I shall be looking at this and self-reporting that many young offenders take part in, to recognise a link between re-offending rates and peak age of committing crime. I will also be exploring another possible reason why young female offenders go through the YJS; they do not think they will get caught in the first place.

This ignorance to the powers of the police could be based in the schools and the teaching that children receive around the 'dangerous stranger'. Again we see imagery used very effectively, or so we think. The teaching in school could be a contributing factor to females who think 'only male offenders will get caught'; the media of course plays a part in this, as well as building up the image of those who

do offend. In effect female offenders are not being informed of the consequences of their actions and the system that is in place to protect them could actually be failing them.

A report in 1997 called 'No More Excuses'<sup>4</sup> does highlight that girls are committing crime, at almost a 1:1 ratio between females and males aged 14-17 (this is from self reporting). This is an important part of looking into the argument laid out above. The government were aware of the issues in 1997, but has the rise in crime since that date been due to failings by the government and the system that they put into place. The report talks about reforming and changing the system (chapter 9), but were these changes put in place and have they really worked. A later report from NACRO<sup>5</sup> in 2001 again identifies the increase in girls in the YJS and YJB. The government seem to be slowly realising that it is not enough to just identify the problem but that something needs to be done about it. In my conclusions I shall draw on this and later reports to see if anything has been done, and address the practices that even now could be changed.

The 'No More Excuses' report also highlights the main factors that contribute to 'youth criminality', this gives the reader a very broad picture of who could offend. These factors would also contribute to any intervention that is pre-court. Again where these factors are identified, it is important to bring into account that they are not totally true for all offenders.

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<sup>4</sup> No More Excuses – a new approach to tackling youth crime in England and Wales (1997) Home Office

<sup>5</sup> Youth Crime Briefing – Girls in the Youth Justice System (2001) NACRO, London

We have seen changes in the YOTs and the Young Offenders Institutes, including the introduction of child-care facilities. This specific change may not have been necessary, if the girls had been properly informed at school about other opportunities that are available for them. This is a matter that also needs to be looked at in the early prevention programmes. Some contributing factors that have been identified by the report can not necessarily be eradicated; if a girl already has a sibling that is an offender then she is more likely to offend. Have these changes been effective in reducing re-offending specifically. This is another factor I will be evaluating. With the amount of literature that has been issued on government run services, such as social services, it is hard to ignore the part they play in a child's life. Looking in to this will include looking at how many girls the intervention and prevention programmes deal with.

With the changing face of youth culture and youth justice this is a hard subject to ignore. Although there have been several more recent developments in the YJS, it is yet to be seen that these will have a positive effect on reducing crime where girls are the offenders.

## **Chapter 1**

This chapter aims to explore one side of the argument for the question set out above. This part of the literature review will look at all the current and historical views that say there is a rise in crime in female young offenders, which is not due to all the factors that contribute to under- and over-reporting. The reviews can give simple answers that clearly need to be given depth and a shown understanding as to why that may be the case.

When looking into statistics from the past two years the numbers show a clear increase in the amount of girls going through the YJS. Between 1993 and 1999 custodial sentences handed to girls rose by 400% (taken from [crimeinfo.org.uk](http://crimeinfo.org.uk)). This large statistic only relates to a small amount of girls. The question could be easily answered, but this is just one of many statistics. Literature that is currently available suggests an increase in girls in the YJS and YJB. This is a comparison of the statistics that are published annually by the organisations that deal with young offenders.

The history of female criminality has been encased in male criminality since the term first came about. Today the background of female criminality is coupled with the ideas of the 'ladette' culture and the lack of positive female role models in the current society. Literature no longer thinks of the female as doubly deviant (Heidensohn, 1996). In the past this double deviance has worked both for and against a female offender, we see this in the many articles written on the chivalry of the courts. There can be several reasons why an individual was seen as doubly deviant in the history of British society and the history of crime in general.

Heidensohn used the phrase 'deviant as women' to describe how a woman would

be sentenced by the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and also face the judgement of the community around them.

Although today's society has changed and would not see young female offenders as doubly deviant, there is a recognised stigma attached to any individual who commits crime. They can still be labelled and the negatives of committing crime will be attached to them. Over 47,000 females under 18 committed a crime in the 2003/04<sup>6</sup> report by the YJB. This is an increase of 0.9% from 2002/03. The increase that is happening could be due to many factors.

One of these factors could simply be that more girls are committing crime. From self-reports it is shown that the peak age for offending in girls is 14 years old. This differs from boys, where the age at which offending peaks at is 18. Girls are more likely to commit minor offences, such as theft and criminal damage. The girls who commit these crimes are unaware of the processes that happen after they commit a crime. They basically do not think they will get caught. This could be backed up by how the courts and the YJB are perceived to be dealing with women and girls in general. The current focus for the current government is 'tough on crime; tough on the causes of crime' but this ignores the sentencing after crime. Girls who commit crime can often walk away with a caution and if she is already responsible for children then a young offenders institute catering for her needs maybe safer than sending her home with a caution. The government may have, unintentionally, given girls a motive to commit crime. When looking at these motives you can also address the issues that come with the types of crimes being committed by girls. Girl gangs who are more intimidating may create opportunities for themselves and be

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<sup>6</sup> Youth Justice – Annual Statistics 2003/04, Youth Justice Board For England and Wales

able to achieve more crime because of their size. These opportunities may give way to the feeling that that particular set of girls can then commit any crime and get away with it. This, as we have seen, is a false hope and a false ideal. This is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed within the YJS.

The population of the young offender's institutes across the country is increasing in all areas. The 2002/03 report does not distinguish between girls and boys in the population of the secure estates in the country. By 2003/04 it recognises that girls are a significant part of the population, with 201 girls in Secure Estates in March 2004. Within the year of this particular report the secure estates population rises and falls irregularly. There is no given connection between this and the rates of offending, the data has not been analysed. It could then be assumed that girls are not being directed towards the secure estates but are more likely to be directed into the community.

Another reason for a rise in crime by young girls could be the lack of positive roles models, not only in the media, but in the home too. Young girls are currently growing up in a society that has less value for the woman who is in the home. Society has a greater expectation on girls to grow up and be a successful career woman whilst also looking after a family. The problem arises because she is also expected to do it all alone. It is perceived that there is no longer a need for a man in woman's life. This was originally an extremist feminist view which girls are now subject to on a daily basis. There has also been a major increase in the number of lone-parent families in British society. Media portrayal of lone-parent families firstly added to the stigma, and in more recent times has helped the idea and the reality of it become more acceptable. This is highlighted in a paper given by Cherie

Blair (2004) focussing on the young mothers who are in custody. It seems as though the Prison service is more than willing to deal with young mothers, but preventing them committing crime is not addressed. Reports are now based on how well a woman can do without a man; they can cope with living on government benefits. This could be contributing to the crimes of trust that girls commit. We also see the regular reports of binge drinking by those who can and do. The role model now, is to be successful during the week and drink at the weekend.

Girls have this to deal with; they are not discouraged from following this role model, but they are not necessarily encouraged to follow any other role models set. The positive roles models that are set are often over shadowed by the negative, and the girls who need those positive roles models are unaware that they exist. The example of Maxine Carr's media portrayal is the most recent expression of this. She was a doting girlfriend, who tried in vain to help her boyfriend cover up a terrible crime. In the past she would have been seen as doubly deviant and probably locked away for the accessory that she was eventually found out to be. Now we see that she has been given a false identity and a safe house so that she can live the rest of her life in peace. She is being looked after by the state, as are many girls who commit crime.

Motives behind crime are also worth exploring. Britain has come up against the notion of girl gangs in the past and, although NACRO<sup>7</sup> has suggested that there is no rise in girl gangs (in Scotland), gangs are seen as a reason for the increase in crime over the past few years. Girl gangs are not an original idea; Davies<sup>8</sup> identifies the gangs in the late Victorian era. These gangs had originally been ignored, as

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<sup>7</sup> Youth Crime Briefing – Girls in the Youth Justice System (2001) NACRO, London

<sup>8</sup> Davies, A. (1999) 'These viragoes are no less cruel than the lads' *British Journal of Criminology* Vol 39 No 1 Pp 72-89

women were an under-class at the time. It's this all-male association that makes the history of the CJS apparently unbalanced. These gangs, all but forgotten by modern society, have changed the CJS and improved it; however girl gangs still exist and are less likely to be seen as serious. They are generally seen as being based on girls finding an identity for themselves, unlike boys gangs who will get together just to commit crime. So the rise in crime for female offenders could be attributed to this phenomenon of girl gangs, but this is unlikely. Studies into these subcultures have mainly been focussed on boys.

The previous generation could also be a contributing factor to the rise in crime amongst young female offenders. Many of today's offenders have parent/s which grew up in the 1960's/70's. Lombrosian<sup>9</sup> theory dictates that some people will offend due to their body type and with development in scientific evidence, their DNA. We know that this is not ultimately the case, but the question of genetics does arise. The nature/nurture debate plays a huge part in any question of crime and who commits crime. Girls who commit crime are more likely to come from a background of crime, where one sibling is already in to crime and they are in contact with friends who commit crime<sup>10</sup>. It seems from these ideas that crime could be something that the government in the Britain is, again unintentionally, encouraging. The paper in 1997 does not at first identify that youth criminality can include girls, but then goes on to explain that they are different. This paper only spends two points looking into why girls are different and identifying the statistics from self-reporting. This is a criticism that will be discussed when looking at whether crime has actually increased, or is just experiencing over-reporting.

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<sup>9</sup> Lombroso, C. (1911) *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston

<sup>10</sup> No More Excuses – a new approach to tackling youth crime in England and Wales (1997) Section 1.5 Home Office, London

There has been a rise in different types of crime. Burglary and handling of stolen goods may have gone down, but Newburn (1997<sup>11</sup>) points out that ‘the number of cautions or convictions of violent offences for female juveniles has been rising’. This is in the last 25 years. This rise could be due to a number of different areas in a girl’s life changing. Again we look in to the ideas of many of the stereotypes and expectation of girls changing. Where girls used to be excluded from the different types of gang culture, they are now more included. There is also a large increase in the number of violent crimes committed in films and the media. The invention of characters, such as ‘Lara Croft’ and more independent and violent women acting as main characters can be seen to have a negative influence on the girls in society. If these negative role models are used and the positive ones are not reinforced then children, not just girls, are more likely to follow what they are shown (Baer et al, 1967<sup>12</sup>). With this there is an increase and a change in the kinds of crimes girls do commit.

It is also an assumption that peer-pressure has a great part to play in crimes that are committed and the level of violence that is involved. Crime is sometimes a more geographical problem. There maybe an increase across the country in general, but drops and rises in separate regions. Those areas with successfully implemented prevention schemes and programmes to help those who have offended not to re-offend, may experience a drop in crime and therefore have fewer convictions in the annual reports. This may not be the case in other areas. There are always areas that will have an increase in crime, violent or non-violent, with no attached cause. There

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<sup>11</sup> Newburn, T., (1997) ‘Youth, Crime and Justice’, in Maguire, M., Morgan, R., and Reiner, R., (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* Oxford, Oxford University Press

<sup>12</sup> Baer, D.M., Peterson, R.F. and Sherman, J.A. (1967) Development of imitation by reinforcing behavioural similarity to a model *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behaviour*, 10, 405-416

could be several reasons for this. One of these may be that the police are not focused on the right area of crime. This has happened in recent years with the focus on black youths, and the stop and search initiative. With the focus in the wrong place and the police and other agencies resources stretched, crime in the ignored areas would rise. This is shown in Newburn's article where the figures and the statistics released are mainly about boys and there is little focus on the young offenders that are girls. These statistics and figures are hard to analyse for a rise when they do not officially exist. The statistics that are currently available from the YJB are not split by region for girls until recently, just by types of crime committed.

When looking at the sociology of crime, there has always been a certain amount of moral panic about the type of person committing crime. The events after 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 are a prime example of this and its effect on a media led Britain. Reports show that men of an Asian and Middle Eastern background were (and still are) targeted for arrest 'under suspicion'. The country was led to believe that many Muslim men were terrorist suspects simply by the way they look. The same theory can now be transferred in to the issues surround girl gangs and the labelling that happens in town centres and estates around the country. The girls are given a label because they hang out with their friends and they 'look like' they may cause trouble, so as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Synder et al, 1977<sup>13</sup>) they start to cause trouble. They are fulfilling the role given to them by the majority of society and the authorities that rule them. This gives them (in their mentality) perfect reason to commit crime and abandon all need to break the stereotype. The violence can be a

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<sup>13</sup> Synder, M., Tanke, E. D. and Berscheid, E., (1977) Social Perception and interpersonal behaviour: On the self-fulfilling nature of social stereotypes *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35, 656-666

manifest of the problems that they are feeling away from the crime. The government has to deal with this and the rise of violent crime shows that they are not being successful in their attempts. The statistics show that the YJS is dealing with more girls each year and the initiatives that are being put in place are not necessarily helping to break stereotypes, they may even be enforcing them.

The YOTs have been reassessed many times since they were piloted in 1998. The YJB annual report and literature does seem to suggest a significant rise in the amount of girls that are dealt with each year. Within this there are several different strategies in place to begin to cut the crime that is happening in different places, this includes the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP).

However, the figures for these and other programmes are not included in the YJB reports; therefore comparison of the two and who they deal with is harder to do.

The figures for girls in intervention programmes and the diversion from re-offending programmes are less likely to be compared. This is a problem for the YJS as it shows that they are not being seen to be dealing with the problem of young female offenders. The identification of such a problem has to come from the system dealing with the problem. This is something that has been learned from the past with the YJB, as originally the government and NACRO identified young female offenders as a problem, but the implementation of initiatives to lower the amount of female offenders takes a significant amount of time to go through.

There have been many things discussed in this argument. The main theme was looking at the statistics of the YJS and YJB. Discovering that there are many statistics and not a lot of literature to cover the rise that there is in the YJS. The

literature that is from the last twenty years does cover a rise in female crime and a change of female criminality, but it does not cover a cause or a solution.

## **Chapter 2**

This chapter will look at recent and historical evidence to show that the youth justice system is not seeing an increase in women right now. There are many reasons why this could happen. Historical evidence would suggest that there is a cycle of increase and decrease in the justice systems with the amount of women entering the system. Recent evidence would suggest that there is not an increase and that the justice systems are actually targeted at different types of people over history. This means that the justice system is currently dealing with more young offenders because it was perceived to be an area of concern for the YJS and CJS.

Newburn (1997<sup>14</sup>) identifies that studies into female delinquency were few. He points out that the studies that were done with women were based around a 'bedroom culture' (McRobbie and Garber, 1976<sup>15</sup>). These studies reach back 20-30 years suggesting that female delinquency was around, but the lack of studies does not reflect the actual amount of crime committed by females. However there is a large gap in the statistics for crime in general and crime committed by females of any age. The divide between males and females is not reported in the YJB reports until 2002. Even at this stage, after girls have been identified as an increasing issue, there is little divide, girls are not seen as important.

This could be another reason for the sudden rise in the statistics of crime for girls in the YJS. It is possible that the style of reporting, in the media and from the YJS, is contributing to the numbers of girls in the young offender's institutes and going through the youth justice board. An article in a national newspaper asked 'Why is

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<sup>14</sup> Oxford Handbook of Criminology, Chapter 19

<sup>15</sup> Cited in The Oxford Handbook of Criminology

the criminal justice system still skewed against women?’<sup>16</sup> (See Appendix 1) The CJS can be seen to be unhelpful for itself when dealing with females and girls. The article suggests that women are still unfairly ruled against in court and ‘double standards’, saying

‘The law is changing but the process is slow and sometimes cosmetic. The old myths and stereotypes of women are still alive, well and being enriched with new clichés; we now have women painted as "ladettes" and binge drinkers to show they were asking for it.’<sup>17</sup>

This idea of media interpretation of girls and women has kept the numbers going through the justice systems high and the moral panic surrounding young female offenders higher. There are also a greater number of women working in the youth justice system, with the introduction of YOTs and the use of restorative justice. The over representation of girls could be attributed to the person who is handing out the sentence. If the doubly deviant label sticks to girls then it is quite possible that girls are over represented in the courts because they have been sentenced by a female judge and therefore get a longer or harder sentence. Although there are no statistics to suggest this is the case.

However, this moral panic can not be attributed and related to just today’s system, we can also look back to the Victorian era and see that there were problems with women and girls too. Davies (1999) highlights that the women, or ‘viragoes’, are just as violent and horrible as the men who were committing crime at the time. The

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<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, H. The Guardian 10<sup>th</sup> March 2005

<sup>17</sup> The Guardian 10<sup>th</sup> March 2005

crimes committed then were relevant to that era, as much as shoplifting and criminal damage is relevant today. In Davies' article he also points out the media influence that was prominent in the areas of Manchester and Salford. The girls in these Victorian gangs were seen in the media as girlfriends of the males in the gangs, however Davies highlights that girls did have a more active involvement in the gangs, but only a small amount of conviction of girls were gang-related. The trend of girls or boys committing more crime is shown in figures from Farrington (1992), where he identifies a 'sharp drop' in crime committed by girls between 1985 and 1989. The current rates could be this trend continuing, or the beginning of a new trend. However, Farrington points to the fact that 'there is little hard evidence either about true changes in juvenile delinquency in England and Wales or about the most likely explanations for any such change'.

A surprising report is found in this study, one mother encourages her daughter to fight, and supposedly throws the first punch. This would suggest that the role models that parents set, does have a resounding influence on children. There emerges another reason why crime is not rising in certain places; the parents are setting role models for their children and helping them stay away from crime. One of the causes that the government outlines in its 1997 report is that the child who is committing crime is likely to have an older sibling who has already committed crime. If the family has been identified as 'at risk', then that family are likely to be entered into a programme that can help them to steer away from the re-offending that can occur. This would bring the numbers of girls going through the YJS, as [crimeinfo.org.uk](http://crimeinfo.org.uk) indicates that over 50% of girls under 21 will re-offend.

Crime committed by girls has not increased in the last few years as the schools are now starting to get a balance between the teaching of boys and girls. The girls were focussed on in the education system for a long time previous to the last few years. It was thought that poor education in boys had caused a large amount of offending, due to the negative images that school can give out. With the change in focus and the building up of individuals in school, girls are benefiting from the interaction. Girls also benefit hugely from being able to 'grow out' of crime. There could be a link between the age of maturity in girls and the drop of crime. It has been recognised that adolescence is getting younger and children are growing up quicker. If this is the case the youth justice system may see more girls but at an earlier age and at a lesser rate in later years.

The YJS has been considerably skewed in the past towards boys and differing age ranges. The reason that crime has risen could be due to the shift in focus of the YJS in general. Justice systems may now be too focussed on girls and therefore think that it is better to 'set an example to the outside world' by convicting a higher percentage of girls and trying to deterrence tactics within the country. However, it remains to be seen if this is the case entirely. When the separate young offenders secure estates and other detention centres were set up, it is likely that young female offenders were originally under catered for, are now over catered for and even looked after. This would be a reflection on the current state of the YJS.

The figures that say that crime has risen can be explained in such a way that the rise is justified. One way of doing this is to talk about crime across the generations. It is possible that the levels of crime as a natural phenomenon, as part of the society we

live in. This is an original Durkheimian theory that has been part of the sociological background to criminology. Crime is part of society, which is the cause of crime. This theory would say that the rising or falling levels of crime are based on the way society is treating the individual. Therein lays the idea that girl gangs are treated badly and girls are not catered for in other areas of their lives, and so they turn to crime. They feel that there is not any one who understands where they are coming from so they lash out their feelings by damaging something. Society is constantly changing and re-focussing to different groups of people. The criminal and youth justice systems have seen this before, with the 'mods and rockers' and then the young black youths. This could not be a rise in crime but a change in focus towards girls and women in general. As was identified previously, the trends that run in the CJS can also affect the YJS. When focus shifts the YJS experiences an imbalance, as yet there has been nothing to refocus the YJS, so they continue to target young female offenders.

With this idea in place it is quite certain that girls need to be catered for more in the YJS. They have supposedly been ignored by the YJS and the organisations in place for the young offenders across the country. Girls were not seen as a threat or a problem in the reports of the YJS and YJB in 1999, now that they are starting to be recognised, it is important to not over cater for them. Social services and YOTs are yet to talk about single girls without any attachments; the focus has been on single mothers who offend. However, according to [crimeinfo.org.uk](http://crimeinfo.org.uk), girls will soon grow out of crime once they have a family. Is the perceived rise in crime due to the failings of the government, the YOTs and the other agencies involved in looking after children who are at risk of offending?

There is also a great deal to be said about the prevention tactics put in place by the YOTs and the police in areas of high crime. The re-offending rate, it seems, is still high, among girls and boys. Perceived rises in first crime and re-offending can be linked to the kinds of programmes and resources in place for prevention of crime. They may not be focused on getting girls and boys back into society via a route that will really help them. The government can set target levels, but as we have seen before, there is not much time given to meet these targets. When the multi-agency workers want to spend more time with an individual, they often end up losing valuable time with another offender. Under staffing is a problem that the government needs to address.

When looking into re-offending rates and after first offence rehabilitation and reintegration, there is a sufficient amount of information lacking on how girls respond to these different types of programme. The report from the government in 1997 identifies girls in two short paragraphs<sup>18</sup>. This paper says ‘only 34,400’, convicted or cautioned in 1996. Since then the figures have changed, but again there is nothing to show that this is a true rise, or whether the policing and YJS has simply become more efficient at detecting crimes committed by girls.

There is also some sort of public perception in the rise of girls in the YJS over the past twenty years<sup>19</sup>. Looking at the history of the country it is easy to see how women and girls get put into the category of criminal. Overall crime may be going up or levelling out, but that does not mean that specific areas of crime will be

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<sup>18</sup> No More Excuses paper para 1.7 & 1.8

<sup>19</sup> Atkins, L. (2004) cited in Donnellan, C. (2004) Dealing with Crime Vol. 83. Independence, Cambridge.

following the general trend. NACRO (2001) suggests that girls are over-represented within the courts. The figure of girls as a percentage of the offending youth population has dropped to 18.3%. The media and general consensus of the public view says that crime is growing and puts all the different types of crime in together. The public also paints its own view, possibly guided by the media, as to who the offenders and victims are. If they think that girl gangs are more likely to be committing crime at the present time, then that becomes the consensus and there has to be something drastic to change that. The Jamie Bulger case (1992) is a prime example of this. Two very young boys abducting and killing a child younger than themselves was bound to change the public's perception. There has also been a less recent case, Myra Hindley is yet another example of the media painting a bias picture of an individual from her conviction to her later life. The public are generally scared of what they are told to be scared of. When it comes to breaking these stereotypes it is up to the government and the YJB to break the stereotypes, or for a new story or moral panic to come along. Batchelor (2001, see Appendix 2) addresses the issue of media hype and moral panic. At the time media interest in girl gangs was high. Batchelor focussed on the media in Scotland and draws the conclusions that the violence of girl gangs is an 'urban myth' and the general public justify it by saying 'girls are becoming more violent'. Yet again, girls are being compared to their male counter-parts and the statistics that do exist out of context or without real explanations. This causes problems for the genuine problems that are being 'marginalised and ignored'.

It may also be wise to look at the prevention of crime programmes that are in place for girls and boys across the county. If these prevention programmes are not seen to

be working then the perceived rise in crime could be due to the lack of efficiency of these diversion programmes. Without the help and co-operation of the multi-agency groups those stuck in a circle of crime would not be able to break free. The levels of crime also have a background of economical factors. These may not directly affect a young girl, but the parents or carer could be affected. The girl may even turn to crime because of lack of attention from the parents or carer. This is not to say that the YJS needs to change its focus to look at educating the parents. Its sole purpose and aim is to deal with and help young offenders hastily and fairly. This is outlined in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, where YOTs were originally introduced.

This could also be a reason as to why there has been a drop in crime and the YJS no longer deals with a large amount of girls. The recognition of a rise in youth crime a few years ago by the government and the subsequent updating of the whole CJS would mean that there has been a drop in crime, or at least a drop in the number of convictions and custodial sentences handed out by judges. Although this is a very positive move towards fairer sentencing for individuals, as we have seen there is still a bias for harsher and longer sentences for girls who do commit crime.

The culture the girls live in is based on the idea of peer pressure and image. A good life is perceived to come with a great expense. Many girls can cave in to this peer pressure and commit crime to fulfil the need the media places on them to have a specific item that is out of their reach. The other side of this is the way the companies are portrayed in the media. The fact that companies have great profits and still charge large amounts justifies stealing from a young persons point of view,

whether it is from the company or from an individual on the street. The girls themselves create competition in the group and encourage each other to own the best, in many cases this can only be done from stealing. The self-reporting that many young offenders contribute to and happens regularly shows that girls admit to committing crime, but they do not necessarily get caught, therefore the YJS is not dealing with these girls.

If the YJS is not dealing with more girls then it is important to look at where these girls are being diverted to prior or during their crime committing spree. There are several programmes that the girls are being diverted in to, including the Social Services. Once any child has been put under the care of Social Services they can either benefit from it (as the self-publicity makes the public believe) or the system can fail then entirely. The girls could then fall out of the system for years and come back as adult female offenders.

There is no distinction in the reports as to the ratio of first time offenders to persistent offenders. Many would argue that the phrase 'persistent' is objective and therefore cannot be measured. With this in mind, it is possible that the offences girls commit are happening again and again, without consequence. If this is the case, then there are not more girls going through the system, but simply the same girls committing crimes, getting caught each time and failing to learn from their mistakes. The question then has to be 'how can the system change to stop this happening?' Durkheim's theory is then re-visited as one side of the argument, the crime is an innate part of society, wherever, whenever. The other side of this

argument is that girls can be stopped from committing crime if they just have the right role models and they are interested in life outside of crime.

The main themes of this argument exist around moral panic in the country from the media and also the lack of role models and identity in girl's lives, so they turn to crime. It is also important to address the issue that girls who turn to crime normally have a fraught and dysfunctional family background and see no way out. Girls are also being over-represented in the YJS and this can cause an over-reaction to the current situation, being caused by negligence in the systems past. It is important for the YJS to balance this out to stop any further avoidance of the issue.

## **Conclusion**

There is a lot left to be desired about the way the YJS is run for different groups of offenders. From the literature that has been published it seems that many different groups of young offenders may experience different treatment when attending hearings and different parts of the process of the YJS.

It is important in this conclusion to look at the different types of literature studied. The reports from the YJB could be seen as bias towards their own style of reporting and therefore an accurate portrayal of the YJS and YJB may be hard to come across. The YJB has targets that it needs to reach, these targets could be portrayed in a way that shows that they are meeting the targets, possibly unrealistically, set by the government. It would be easier for the board to put a positive light on the reports that they have given during the time they have been operating. There are also a series of obstacles that make the historical comparison hard to make. The YJB did not, until recently, include the statistics for girls as a separate statistic. There was an overall look at crime in the annual reports; break down of the differences between sexes was introduced after 2000. This shows that the focus was on male young offenders. This lean towards male offenders has been shown throughout history, with the police and courts also unaware of the increasing threat of women offenders in the system. From the reports it seems that the YJB and the YJS are taking female offenders in their stride, maybe resting in the knowledge that girls do grow out of crime and if they do not then the CJS is more than capable of dealing with the women. The reports show that any moral panic about an increase would purely be down to the media and the public building up something that is only increasing slightly.

The reports of the youth justice system in the last century suggest that crime could go in cycles of different offending groups. At the start of the last century women were active in their causing and taking part in crime, where causing fights and stealing were rife. It is possible that this is in the middle of a cycle of crime, where the group only gets reported on when they reach the peak. This could be the case today. We are seeing a rise, 100 years later and the rise is in the public eye and therefore demands attention from the justice system and police. Crime patterns over the last twenty years show this rise and drop in other areas of crime, with this in mind the police are perceived to have no control over crime and its inevitability. This however has been seen in Durkheimian theory and is an ideal. The police do have some control over crime, but the focus shifts behind crime. The history of police would show this. The set up of a riot force in the early 1900's and a drug squad later in the same century shows that crime will always be one step ahead of the police and policing in this country at least will have to settle for that fact.

Looking at the current literature available on women, the theories are based on ideas from the past and there is still an encasing of male criminality. Feminist theory would have the public believe that females are being given a raw deal by the Justice systems in place. The extremist view that is exercised by fundamental feminists would seem absurd for most people when looking into the YJS. There are other sides to the argument and with this the different points of view can balance out the way that the YJS is looked at.

A large part of female criminality has been the different types of crime the young female offender commits. This has changed over the centuries and has now settled on the idea that girls are trying to imitate the kinds of crime that boys commit. This is seen to be done through girls and the idea of the existence of girl gangs. These gangs are now at the forefront of criminology, but this could also be seen as part of a cycle in the criminal life of Britain. There are now exclusively female gangs that operate across Britain, but the membership does not work like gangs that are made up exclusively of males. Girls grow out of crime, therefore the girls gang will fade to one or two members when the average age reaches above 16. Whereas the current gang made up of male gangs is based on career criminals who are out of institutes and secure estates and go straight back to the gang as a safe place to be. This shows how differently girls and boys deal with crime in to later life. There is not such a huge emphasis on girls' gangs here as there is in the US. This could be a contributing factor to the current fear of female offenders.

The other conclusion that can be made from the literature reviewed is that crime has not risen at all over the last twenty years, but that the public is just subject to various forms of media hype. The 'true' articles on girl gangs, from chapter two, highlight this. Current literature and historical evidence has been examined in each case, where the presence or lack of girl gangs has been addressed. Both articles show how the media can use propaganda to the effect that they want. It is the task of criminologists and the social scientists to dispel this myth and hype to bring the problems that are the cause of crime to the forefront of the media's attention. The public should no longer feel like the cause is out of their control. The public should not fear something that does not exist, moral panic causes as many problems as it

solves, if not more. Where the government are failing the girls, they should be looking to improve and acting upon those improvements. However, we are only just seeing the problems of girls defined and the solution could be a long way off. That would give just enough time for the perceived problem of girl gangs to escalate to a real problem and for the schemes that are implemented to be ineffective.

Literature highlighting the increase of crime, however, does sell a convincing story, that Britain is falling into a life of crime and now the girls are being affected. With this in mind, it would be easy to fall for the stories in the media. If we believe everything we read moral panic would rule the crowd more often, if it did not already. It does take people like Batchelor to identify the truth behind the media stories. Without a need for the truth Britain may have been convinced not long ago of the extremes that have affected the history of the country. Within this our experiences shape and challenge who we are. If current school children are growing up with a constant fear of the unknown (offenders) and freely mocking the authority figures who deal with the unknown, then how do the current generation in power expect the country to turn out? The women in the justice system at the moment may respect those around them, but how do the younger generation and first time offenders view authority in the secure estates and YOTs? There may be less girls going through the YJS, however it is always important to look at re-offending rates. Without those the YOTs and YJS cannot test its effectiveness. The girls could be experiencing the system, realising how easy it is to manipulate and offending once again because they know their way around.

Crime in Britain is based on what is popular to do at the time. Some crime will always be part of society. The question is whether this type of crime can be reduced to an insignificant level. Girls are committing these types of crime because they do not have any diversion away from violence and a lifestyle that inevitably had their parents captivated. In the same way girls who commit crime and 'get away with it' can be seen as innovators. The police are yet to catch on to the type of crime, but the public can be sure that when they do there will already be a different type of crime being committed. Unfortunately there is always going to be a problem with the police and new types of crime. This could be something that the CJS and YJS will never be able to solve. They may just have to learn how to identify and react to changes in trends of crime quicker.

The 'ladette' culture is something else that has to be addressed when concluding this review. This culture has been named by the media and shunned by several theories as putting a name to a problem and accepting it for what it is; quite simply girls using and abusing their rights. This includes lack of self-control and wanting to match the men in what they do. The media, again, have grasped hold of this and used their power to blow the truth out of proportion. The 'ladette' culture in this light has nothing to do with the rise in crime outwardly. Young females are not matching their male counterparts in violent crime, but further down the scale girls are clearly more involved in trust crimes. Over the past twenty years the world has seen a loss of perceived female identity and where this identity is based; there has been a struggle to find a new identity. Male criminality on the other hand has simply changed its face. Men are still brought up in the masculine frame of mind, and are still called to assert their authority on several occasions. The man of the

house has been asked to take part in the running of the house, creating its own problems, the woman is questioning her identity daily as mother and part of the workforce.

The lack of morals and ground rules over female identity are yet to be firmly established in the generations. The country needs to experience the culture for longer before women will treat their rights better and the justice systems will treat them better in return. Girls need to be reassessed constantly for behaviour and this needs to be reflected in the way they are treated. The governments increasing interest in young female offenders will have to be reassessed, and the outcome of the reassessment will have to be implemented rapidly. Without this sense of urgency there is less chance that crime will be reduced. Although due to the current statistics, there is a lack of any breakdown for women and young offenders. The phrase 'young offender' and 'young women' rarely occurs in the statistical update the government published in 2004. There is little to suggest that women are the perpetrators of crimes, but they are still very much the victim.

With all the arguments and discussions weighed and measured against each other, I would have to conclude that there has not been a significant rise in women going through the youth justice system. There are several articles and issues that have not been addressed by the media in this country, this is sad to see. The media fully recognises its power and continues to use it to scare the public. I believe that the government are very good at talking about offending rates and those who are affected by offences, but are misinformed as to how girls should be dealt with, if at all. I am not suggesting that the current YJS and YJB know nothing about crime

and offending rates, but there is a lot said and little action. Girls need to be given direction and identity. They need to be taught that there is a substantial amount of pressure on them to perform, as individuals and a country-wide group. This pressure needs to be recognised and proper guidance to deal with it is important for any individual. Twenty years ago the education system was adapted to suit girls, now the focus has switched to boys, but girls still have to keep the upper hand, or so they are told.

The country is currently experiencing a moral panic about girls and gangs, and the increase of violent crime against the person. With this in mind, I believe it is important to dispel these 'myths and folk devils' and look to encouraging girls to be the person they want to be. If that happens to be a criminal then they can go through the system and grow out of it ([crimininfo.org](http://crimininfo.org)), which they are more likely to do than boys. I recognise that this is the ideal situation, but it has to be recognised that if crime is seen as the easy way out, then it will be taken. The government and YJS need to toughen up on girls' punishment and give more opportunities for escape from a life of crime. I would suggest that they stop talking and start taking action.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix 1

# Why is the criminal justice system still skewed against women?

Helena Kennedy  
Thursday March 10, 2005  
[The Guardian](#)

We keep being told that feminism has had its day. Women have pulled down all the barriers to their aspirations, have renegotiated their relationships with men and are now scaling the heights that were formerly beyond their reach. The f-word cannot be mentioned without a boo from the sidelines. Girls are doing better than boys in education; they are filling the universities; they are becoming priests. Childcare is being shared, new men are staying at home while their women bring home the bacon. If we are to believe certain newspapers our preoccupations now are simply to ensure our pay is high and our weight is low. A few more legislative changes and all will be well with the world.

In many respects it is true that the battle for formal equality has been won. For the most part, old-fashioned rank prejudice has gone since the laws which underpin formal equality were introduced in 1976. Examples of crude, in-your-face prejudice are much more rare. The case which now has to be made is for substantive equality - treatment as equals, taking account of the real experiences of women and the context of their lives. There has to be greater understanding of the differential effects of policies which, on the face of it, are neutral. It is also important to acknowledge that women are not just one homogenous group. Discrimination now is much more subtle and nuanced and often operates most fiercely at that junction where different forms of prejudice intersect.

When race and class overlap with the social vector of gender, we see in sharp focus the disadvantages still suffered by so many women. Being poor and female makes for a very different experience from that of the middle-class professional. Add the brickbats of racism, and the burden of multiple discrimination can be unbearable.

The backlash against feminism takes many forms. Men are the ones we are now to be concerned about. They are being battered; they are having false claims made against them of child abuse because of false memory syndrome; they are being refused access to their children; they are falling prey to shameless hussies who try to get money out of tabloids for their stories. All of it does happen. Men can be used and abused too. Their pain at false accusation is no less. Their loss of their children is just as raw a wound. But the smoke and mirrors used to enlarge these claims are the products of fear that the old arrangements between the sexes might be reconfigured in ways that may be less to the satisfaction of some men. After September 11, American evangelical preachers even claimed that the events were a punishment for the behaviour of feminists and other deviants.

I have just rewritten *Eve Was Framed*, my book on women and the criminal justice system which was originally published in 1992, and it is shocking to see that although a lot has happened, not enough has changed. I do not want to minimise the many gains that have been made by women over the past decade. There are causes for optimism. The creation of pilot programmes, where special domestic violence courts will operate a speedy, multi-agency response to abuse is a major development. The many projects within the police, prosecution and penal service to address women's concerns are to be welcomed. There is a desperate need for special units to deal with rape cases and the Crown Prosecution Service is putting them in place. A lot has improved within the courts and legal system. We have more women on the bench and practising in the courts. There is no doubt that the government has taken on many women's issues and taken women's experience of victimisation to the heart of criminal law policy.

However, there has been a rolling of women's concerns into a generalised rhetoric about victims. All victims are bundled up together, when policy-makers should be brave enough to say that cases involving abuse of intimacy and the historic discrimination against women deserve special treatment. However, many ministers live in fear of being ridiculed as being in the thrall of "feminists"; they recoil from the reality that the most ill-treated victims within our system are women and children, and that this is still a reflection of some very disconcerting facts about male violence. What is the gender of most children abused over a long period and eventually killed by parents? From Jasmine Beckford to Victoria Climbié, go through the files of the NSPCC and you will find that they are almost invariably girls. Of course, boy children are also killed in outbursts of rage or to wreak revenge but the slow torture of children is most often directed at girls. What is the gender of the partner most often beaten in a relationship? What is the gender of those most often sexually violated? When we hear a body has been found, someone killed in a park by a stranger, what sex is the victim? When we hear of honour killings who is found dead? The gendered nature of certain crimes and their victims and the gendered nature of so much law, because it is largely created and administered by men, is still insufficiently recognised or discussed.

Instead of debating all these questions boldly, politicians hide behind the much more acceptable cloak of a generalised heading, marked "victims". Often with victims as their alibi, huge inroads are made into civil liberties. The most troubling and pressing questions are never asked. What is it about men that they are so much more disposed to criminality as a sex? Is masculine violence a feature of a patriarchal culture and why is so much of it directed at women? If so what are we doing about it within the education system? What are we doing to divert men from abuse? Discussions about violence never get to the heart of these issues because they are so disconcerting for us, reaching into dark places where primordial power-play simmers.

If we consider just how our law has historically criminalised aggression - how certain types of anti-social behaviour have been targeted, while others have been either formally or practically left unregulated - then it seems that such law is about male patterns of behaviour and about male standards of acceptable conduct. The law on rape and the minimising of domestic violence are the paradigm examples of this perspective; the law is gendered, especially in relation to violence, and the new gender-neutral language of legislation does not fully disguise this fact. It is why we had to go through such contortions to get the defence of provocation to work for women in domestic killings. Women rarely killed in a sudden blind rage; as the law required, more usually their loss of control arose from despair, like the final surrender of frayed elastic. Only now are the courts shifting to accommodate this different reality. Despite the fact that we know that men and women behave differently and seem to act for different reasons, we still watch governments provide universal theories of crime and formulate general criminal laws that are meant to work in a gender neutral manner. We are just not prepared to face the facts of crime. Sex is the most salient variable when it comes to offending.

Until women and children get justice in the system, certain special processes are justified, including anonymity for complainants in sexual offence cases and anonymity for children at all times. However, at regular intervals, we have to rehearse the arguments about why accused men should not be given the cover of anonymity in some spurious call for equality. Open justice means anonymity should be used sparingly. The coverage of a rape case at times leads to the discovery that the male accused is a multiple offender, because other women are given the confidence to come forward.

Redressing the profound historic failures in relation to women means having to take special steps and the government should be upfront about this.

"Gender bias" does include bias against men, and there are cases, particularly those involving child custody, where this certainly applies. The difference is that the majority of men in court are stereotypically viewed as powerful, credible and independent. The men who do invoke negative stereotypical assumptions - homosexual, black, Irish, Arab, vagrant, Gypsy, unemployed - can suffer just as women do.

The law is also disfigured by pernicious stereotypes of women. The punitive pursuit of Maxine Carr, Ian Huntley's former girlfriend, who was acquitted of any involvement in the Soham murders, reveals a continuing belief that women have a special, nurturing responsibility towards children. Women who don't fulfil our expectations of good womanhood are judged by double standards.

Increasingly, the arena of political change has moved to the courts, where individual cases become a way of raising wider political issues. As Rahila Gupta of Southall Black Sisters says, "It is as though individual pain is the only point of entry into an understanding of a systemic disorder." Law has become a political space for women that is capable of being used as an engine of change. Some of the most high-profile and important cases heard in the courts in recent years have involved women asserting their rights and testing the boundaries of the law: the case of Diane Pretty, who suffered from motor neurone disease, over the right to die; Diane Blood over the right to conceive using the sperm of her dead husband; the women in the military who were dismissed once they became pregnant. And then we have had the terrible appeals involving sudden infant deaths, such as those of Angela Cannings and Sally Clark, where women have been victims of miscarriages of justice, their mothering called into question.

The law is changing but the process is slow and sometimes cosmetic. The old myths and stereotypes of women are still alive, well and being enriched with new cliches; we now have women painted as "ladettes" and binge drinkers to show they were asking for it.

What has changed during my professional life is women's expectations. Women are very clear that they will not settle for a system that does not listen to them or take account of their lives; the legal system is becoming wise to that fact. Women have gone through the stage where they did the adjusting; now they expect the institutions to change. The symbol of justice may be a woman but none of us will settle for symbols.

## The Myth of Girl Gangs

Susan Batchelor was one of the team who recently completed a study on girls and violence funded by the ESRC. But the findings were not what the media wanted to hear.

Headlines about 'girl gangs' roaming the streets and randomly attacking innocent victims have been a recurring feature of the pages of our newspapers. In such reports, 'girl violence' has been presented as becoming commonplace. Yet the everyday experience of girls presents a very different picture of the nature and extent of violence in girls' lives. Drawing on press coverage of a recent study of 'ordinary' girls' views and experiences of violence, this article will examine the main differences between media and real life images of girls and violence.

### What the research said

*A View from the Girls: Exploring Violence and Violent Behaviour* (ESRC funded) was a study developed within the context of a perceived increase in violent and aggressive behaviour by girls, fuelled by considerable media attention. In spite of this attention, we knew very little about the nature and extent of violent behaviour by girls, or the impact of violence in their lives. There are several reasons for this lack of knowledge, but the main one is that violence is overwhelmingly committed by men. Violence by women is rare: in Scotland in 1998, only seven-and-a-half per cent of those found guilty

of non-sexual crimes of violence were female - a total of 412 women (Scottish Executive, 1999).

The findings from the girls and violence study support the view that violence by girls is not a major social problem. We found little evidence to suggest that girls are using physical violence to any great extent, since only a very small proportion of girls (five per cent) reported being routinely

physically violent towards others. Perhaps most notably, we did not find any evidence of the existence of girl gangs. Not one of the 800 teenage girls that took part in the research claimed to be in a girl gang, nor did they know of anyone else who was a member. (Most researchers believe that a 'gang' must have a name, identifiable 'colours', a formal authority structure, and, perhaps most importantly, endurance over time. See Campbell, 1995, for further discussion.)

What our research did find was that girls' ideas about 'what counts' as violence did not correspond with adult or legal views. A common understanding of violence is of an intentionally harmful, interpersonal physical act, such as punching or kicking. This was challenged by many of the girls that we spoke to, who maintained that verbal behaviours (such as name-calling, threats and intimidation) were often intended and experienced as potentially more hurtful and damaging than physical violence.

Girls also considered the context in which a particular act occurs as important. Physical fights between brothers and sisters within the home were not seen as 'violent' in the same way as fights taking place between other young people outside the home, no matter how serious. Such fighting (between siblings) was reported as a frequent occurrence, accounting for 59 per cent of the violence reported by girls.

Witnessing physical violence was another common experience. The vast majority of girls reported having witnessed some form of interpersonal physical violence at firsthand, and nearly two-thirds knew someone who had been hurt by physical violence. In the majority of cases, such incidents involved young people from their local neighbourhood.

### What the papers said

Long before fieldwork began, the girls and violence study attracted an immense amount of media interest, and this continued throughout its duration. At times, we were fielding up to 25 media enquiries per week. Newsworthiness is the key to understanding the intensity of media coverage. British national newspapers have always looked towards crime, particularly violent crime, to generate a strong supply of 'good stories'. The problem is that much crime is mundane. Newspapers get round this problem by focusing on atypical and dramatic cases. 'Girl violence' is newsworthy because of the gender of the offender, not the crime she has committed. It epitomises everything that challenges the way in which 'nice girls' behave. This is in stark contrast to the presumed naturalness of men's aggression: nowhere is the violence of young men reported as 'boy violence'.

Press coverage consistently depicted the project as a study developed in response to the 'problem' of violence by young women ("Concern at girls and



'Bad Girls'. The cast of the popular ITV prison drama. Shed Productions

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violence - Study investigates female aggression", *The Herald*, 20/10/98). High profile cases were cited as evidence of a growing trend of girl thugs and these were spuriously linked to the research project ("Teen project looks at torture case", *Greenock Telegraph*, 4/5/98). Coverage of these cases typically consisted of a brief account of isolated incidents, with little or no detail or background information.

Following the launch of the findings, newspapers took a range of 'angles' on the key messages of the research. Some focused on girls' fear of sexual assault ("Girls live in fear of sexual attack", *The Herald*, 30/9/00), the impact of verbal abuse and fall outs between friends ("Girls fear losing their friends more than rape", *Sunday Herald*, 24/9/00), and girls' everyday experience of violence ("Violence is just a fact of life say teenage girls", *Daily Telegraph*, 7/10/00). It could be argued that these headlines broadly represent the key findings outlined above. However, a closer reading indicates an over-reliance on existing media templates (e.g. the threat of sexual violence and the escalation/normalisation of physical violence) and careless use of 'hard' quantitative data. For example, one report claimed that "four out of ten [girls] had been beaten up". Whilst our findings did report that 41 per cent of girls from the self-report survey had been the victim of physical violence, we were careful to explain that this meant they had been hit, kicked or punched by someone on at least one occasion. This finding has to be considered in light of the qualitative data, which suggests that the majority of such incidents occur between siblings in the home.

Newspaper reports also used horror stories and unusual case studies to illustrate the research findings. One newspaper claimed that "One girl said she was too scared to leave the house for fear of being attacked. Another described how a girl gang member had held a knife to the throat of her best friend". Not only were these two incidents reported inaccurately (one girl told us she was afraid to leave the house for fear of being sexually attacked and another told us of a friend who had a knife held to his throat by another young man), they were atypical events and by no means represented the common experience of girls. This suggests a difficulty on the part of journalists, who are working to tight deadlines and strict word limits, in engaging with crucial contextual information.

### Misquoting research

Another 'angle' adopted by the press involved misquoting the research to back up the girl gang story ("Deadly as the males - Experts probe explosion of violence by girl gangs", *Daily Record*, 30/9/00). The report appearing in the *Daily Record*, Scotland's biggest selling newspaper, claimed that: "The shocking extent of violence among teenage girls in Scotland

**Whenever I tell people about the subject of my research, they virtually always respond with an urban myth about a friend of a friend who was the victim of a girl gang...**

was revealed yesterday. A study found girl gangs taking part in unprovoked attacks is now commonplace". The article went on to allege that "The number of violent crimes committed by girl thugs in Scotland has almost doubled in the last decade". Unsurprisingly, the reporter did not cite the source of this data. If we look at the official figures for the last eleven years (1987-1997), we can see that the number of women convicted of violent offending in Scotland has increased, but only by 15 per cent (that is, 38 additional cases). The comparable figure for men is an increase of 26 per cent, or 818 cases (*Scottish Executive*, letter, 21 April 1999). It is worth noting that, because the number of violent crimes committed by women is so low, a very small number of cases can make a great deal of difference in terms of percentage rises.

### So what?

Whenever I tell people about the subject of my research, they virtually always respond with an urban myth about a friend of a friend who was the victim of a girl gang, or alternatively they put forward the 'common-sense' view that girls are becoming more violent. The main problem with misrepresenting the reality of girls' lives is that it can contribute to unrealistic public attitudes, which in turn can create misdirected public policy. The media fondness for relying on simplified statistics and atypical cases precludes any discussion of the complex socio-specific contexts of violence in girls' lives. As young women are demonised by the media, their genuine problems can be marginalised and ignored. Indeed, it is the girls who have become the problem.

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