Racial Disparities among Female Juvenile Offenders: The Contribution of Neighborhood Disadvantage and Exposure to Violence in Antisocial Behavior

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Racial Disparities among Female Juvenile Offenders: The Contribution of Neighborhood Disadvantage and Exposure to Violence in Antisocial Behavior

Preeti Chauhan, Mandi L. Burnette, & N. Dickon Reppucci

Significant racial disparities exist within the juvenile justice system. Across age and gender, black and minority Americans are disproportionately represented within the justice system as compared to white Americans. In examining issues related to disproportionate minority contact, research has historically focused almost exclusively on males, given their greater presence in the system. However, the representation of females in the juvenile justice system is rising. For instance, from 1980 to 2003, the proportion of girls under the age of 18 who were arrested increased for both the Violent Crime Index (i.e., aggravated assault, rape, robbery, and murder) and the Property Crime Index (i.e., larceny, motor vehicle theft, arson, and burglary). Hence, as the gender gap in arrest rates continues to decrease and the overrepresentation of minorities persists, it becomes important to consider two crucial questions: 1) Are black and white female juvenile offenders different in terms of their risk profiles? and 2) Do these risk profiles differentiate the pathways by which these two groups reengage in antisocial behavior?

This article summarizes the prevalence and function of neighborhood- and individual-level risk factors for antisocial behavior among black and white female juvenile offenders from the Gender and Aggression Project (GAP)—Virginia Site, which consisted of a sample of incarcerated girls followed into the community. Specifically, we examined the prevalence of the following risk factors: 1) absolute neighborhood disadvantage, defined as the percentage of female-headed households, people on public assistance, people below the poverty line, and people unemployed using census data at tract level, 2) relative disadvantage, defined as the amount of income inequality within a given census tract, 3) physical victimization by parents and/or peers, and 4) witnessing criminality and violence within the environment. We next determined whether racial differences existed with regard to these risk factor—that is, are black versus white female offenders more likely to have grown up in disadvantaged neighborhoods and/or to have witnessed violence within their surroundings. Finally, we assessed whether these risk factors operated differently by race. In other words, we wanted to know whether specific risk factors—such as growing up in a disadvantaged neighborhood—were more predictive of antisocial behavior for black versus white girls. These findings have the potential to lead to a better understanding of the discrepant representation of minorities in the judicial system and provide an opportunity to tailor interventions and reentry programs to divergent population needs.

Self-Report versus Official Reports of Antisocial Behavior

The study of antisocial behavior is complex, and adding further ambiguity is the fact that differences often exist depending on the source of data. Two primary sources exist for assessment of antisocial behavior: self-reported behavior and official records of offending. A significant body of research examining the merits of each of these measurement methods exists. Using both indicators is ideal as each provides unique information. However, the decision as to which indicator is actually used is often informed by: 1) the specific research question (i.e., whether the outcome of interest is getting “caught”

Footnotes


4. From 1980 to 2003, the proportion of girls increased from 10% to 18% for the Violent Crime Index, with the majority of it being attributed to aggravated assault. For the Property Crime Index, the proportion of girls increased from 19% to 32%.

5. We were unable to examine racial differences with regard to other minorities given the relatively smaller numbers. Nineteen girls were of other ethnicities including Native American, Hispanic, and Other. Black girls constituted 69 girls from our sample, whereas white girls constituted 53.

6. Note that criminologist and sociologists often refer to income inequality as relative deprivation.
versus actually engaging in an antisocial act), 2) logistic constraints (i.e., access to either or both forms of information), and 3) methodological constraints (i.e., is self-report of offending accurate? How often do police catch the person committing the antisocial behavior?). Some evidence suggests that risk factors such as neighborhood disadvantage and family processes operate similarly for both outcomes—self-report of offending and official records. The analyses presented below examine data from both sources.

**DOES NEIGHBORHOOD DISADVANTAGE CONTRIBUTE TO RACIAL DISPARITIES IN FEMALE ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR?**

Research has found that neighborhood disadvantage, or absolute disadvantage, explains a significant portion of the racial disparity observed in antisocial behavior. That is, the racial gap in offending is believed to be propelled by three salient factors: 1) black versus white Americans are more likely to inhabit disadvantaged neighborhoods that have higher rates of crimes, 2) black Americans are less able to leave high-crime neighborhoods compared to their white counterparts, and 3) low-income white families rarely live in the same level of disadvantage as black families.

Other research has found that relative disadvantage or income inequality predicts antisocial behavior. Theoretically, income inequality can create frustration and promote interpersonal competition for limited material and social resources, which in turn drives antisocial behavior. Hence, the higher rates of antisocial behavior among black Americans may be due to social comparison in income inequality rather than absolute disadvantage. The impact of both types of neighborhood factors on racial disparities in antisocial behavior has been demonstrated empirically: 1) at a macro-level or population level using census data and official crime reports and/or 2) at a micro-level or individual level within high-risk populations, specifically adults, boys, and psychiatric inpatients.

**IS EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE AN IMPORTANT RISK FACTOR FOR FEMALE ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOR?**

Experiencing and witnessing violence are particularly relevant for female juvenile offenders because rates of exposure are extremely high among incarcerated girls and linked with antisocial behavior. With regard to racial differences, in non-incarcerated samples, Black Americans are more likely to both

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16. Candice L. Ogdens & N. Dickon Reppucci, *Female Young Offenders: A Meta-Analytic Approach*, paper presented at the Vancouver Conference on Aggressive and Violent Girls: Contributing Factors and Intervention Strategies (2002). In their review of the literature on female juvenile offenders, Ogdens and her colleagues found estimates of experiencing violence to be as high as 90% in some samples. *See also Angela Dixon, Pauline Howie, & Jean Starling, Psychopathology in Female Juvenile Offenders, 45 J. CHILD PSYCHOL. & PSYCHIATRY 1150 (2004).*
experience and witness violence. Evidence is mixed as to whether these risk factors have a greater influence on antisocial behavior among black Americans. However, when racial differences are observed, black Americans experience more detrimental outcomes. Hence, witnessing and experiencing violence may help to explain some of the reasons for the disproportionate representation of black Americans in the justice system at an individual (versus a neighborhood) level.

DO BLACK AND WHITE FEMALE JUVENILE OFFENDERS DIFFER IN TERMS OF THEIR RISK PROFILES OF NEIGHBORHOOD DISADVANTAGE AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE? Findings from our research team indicated that black female juvenile offenders are more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods at an absolute and relative level as compared to white female juvenile offenders. As stated, absolute and relative neighborhood disadvantage was assessed using census data at a tract level. Census tracts average about 4,000 people, have relatively homogenous characteristics, and are defined by significant physical boundaries such as rivers and major streets. We used four indicators for absolute disadvantage: 1) percentage of people below the poverty line, 2) percentage of households on public assistance, 3) percentage of female-headed households, and 4) percentage of people unemployed. For relative disadvantage, we created the Gini index to measure income inequality. This index was calculated by examining household income distribution within each census tract. A score of zero indicates that all households have similar incomes and one indicates that income is disparate. Black girls lived in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than their white counterparts with respect to all four indicators of absolute disadvantage. That is, they lived in neighborhoods that had higher percentages of female-headed households, people unemployed, households on public assistance, and people below the poverty line. Similarly, black girls were also more likely to live in relatively disadvantaged neighborhoods as compared to white girls. As such, this suggests that their neighborhood had greater income disparity and were more heterogeneous, with regard to income, as compared to white girls.

High rates of exposure to violence were present among both black and white female juvenile offenders. With regard to experiencing violence, we asked girls whether a father, mother, friend, or romantic partner had: 1) pushed, grabbed, or shoved her in an argument; 2) threw something at her; 3) slapped, kicked, bit, or hit her with a fist; and/or 4) hit her with an object in the six months before incarceration. As illustrated in Table 1, the majority of girls experienced some form of violence by her parents (65%) and by her peers (75%). Black and white girls reported experiencing similar levels of violence by both parents and peers. Experiencing violence by fathers was less prevalent than by mothers, but this is likely a function of high rates of father absence within the girls’ families.

With regard to witnessing violence, we asked girls if she saw the following, six months before incarceration, in her home, school, and/or neighborhood: 1) someone getting beat up, 2) somebody getting stabbed or shot, 3) guns, 4) guns being shot, 5) somebody getting arrested, and 6) gang activity. Nearly all girls (98%) reported witnessing violence; estimates were lower for violence at home (66%) compared to school (94%) and neighborhood (94%). This highlights the substantial violence and criminality that these girls witness within multiple contexts. Black and white girls reported similar levels of witnessing violence.

ARE BLACK AND WHITE FEMALE JUVENILE OFFENDERS DIFFERENT WITH REGARD TO POST-RELEASE SELF-REPORT AND OFFICIAL RECORDS OF OFFENDING? There were no racial differences in self-report of offending, but black girls had higher official reports of offending. With regard to self-report of offending, we asked each girl if she had engaged in violent behaviors since her release. These behaviors included: 1) carried a gun, 2) used a weapon to get money or things from people, 3) used a weapon (stick, knife, gun, rocks) while fighting with another person, 4) participated in gang activity, 5) been in a fistfight, 6) attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting or killing that person, and 7) shot at someone. We also asked if she had engaged in the following delinquent behaviors since her release: 1) driven while drunk or high, 2) sold marijuana, pot, or hashish, 3) sold hard drugs (other than pot), such as heroin, cocaine, acid, or others, 4) broken or tried to break into a building or vehicle to steal something, 5) stolen or tried to steal a motor vehicle such as a car or a motorcycle to keep or sell, and 6) been paid to have sexual relations with someone.

As Table 1 illustrates, after release, the majority of girls (60%) continued to engage in antisocial behavior with about half (54%) engaging in violent behaviors and a third engaging in delinquent behaviors (31%). Black and white girls reported approximately equivalent levels of antisocial behavior after release.

About half of the girls were rearrested with more having charges for nonviolent offenses than for violent offenses. Violent arrest charges included murder, assault and battery, and robbery. Nonviolent arrest charges included driving while under the influence, grand larceny, and breaking and entering. According to official records, black girls were more likely that white girls to be rearrested; this was true for nonviolent but not violent crimes.


19. The differences in exposure to violence (both experiencing and witnessing violence) were statistically analyzed at a continuous level even though only categorical data are presented.

LIVING IN A DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBORHOOD INCREASED THE ODDS OF OFFICIAL ARREST FOR NON-VIOLENT CRIMES BY TENFOLD

As noted, black girls were more likely to be rearrested, particularly for nonviolent crimes, compared to white girls. However, once neighborhood disadvantage was added to the equation, race was no longer predictive of nonviolent rearrest. That is, being black mattered less than living in a disadvantaged neighborhood. In fact, living in a disadvantaged neighborhood increased the odds of being rearrested for a nonviolent crime by about tenfold. This suggests that the high rearrest rates among black girls are related to factors within their neighborhood as opposed to higher engagement in antisocial behavior. It further indicates that factors within their neighborhoods such as heavy policing and differential surveillance could be playing a strong role in whether the girls are getting caught for their antisocial behavior, but not whether they are actually engaging in antisocial behavior.

IMPLICATIONS

Because of the pronounced racial disparities observed in offending statistics and the relative lack of information available on female offenders, we explored whether racial differences existed in the impact of neighborhood characteristics and exposure to violence among black and white girls. Similar to results on boys and adults, we observed a racial disparity in official offending statistics. However, this higher involvement in antisocial behavior was not reflected in self-reported antisocial behavior among these girls. Given that behaviors were equivalent across race, differences in rearrest rates may stem from the way the justice system monitors or processes antisocial behavior among black versus white girls. This finding suggests that there are likely systemic biases that exist within the broader society that contribute to the overrepresentation of minorities in the justice system, perhaps particularly with nonviolent crimes. One possibility is that the higher rates of rearrest for black girls may be due to other community-level factors such as higher police surveillance and willingness by police to arrest individuals in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Interestingly, the concept of relative disadvantage was not associated with antisocial behavior and may be less relevant for females in general. While research has generally found a robust relationship between income inequality and violence using official statistics and crime data, no studies have examined whether this concept applies to both men and women. From an evolutionary perspective, relative disadvantage may be a stronger predictor for male antisocial behavior because men may be more influenced by social status and social hierarchy.

Regardless of racial differences in neighborhoods, there were equivalent and high levels of exposure to violence by both groups. This further confirms that girls in the juvenile justice system experience high levels of adverse experiences across relationships and contexts, highlighting the need for rehabilitation programs. Indeed, victimization was virtually universal among this group, and girls in deprived neighborhoods are not experiencing additional victimization.

Our work further indicates that pathways to antisocial behavior may differ by race. For white girls, we found experiencing violence by parents emerged as a more potent risk factor for both forms of antisocial behavior even though the overall prevalence was equivalent for the two groups. This would suggest an increased importance of what the girls personally experience rather than what is going on in their environment. Witnessing violence, especially in the community, emerged as a potent risk factor for both forms of antisocial behavior among black girls. Even though girls are personally witnessing this violence, the results suggest the added importance of community factors in the maintenance of antisocial behavior among black girls.

These findings have strong implications with regard to addressing the issue of racial disparities and antisocial behavior within the juvenile justice system. Traditional mental health treatment, while necessary, operates at an individual level and is perhaps best suited to address individual-level problems (e.g., child abuse, psychopathology). However, our data suggest that to reduce racial disparities in antisocial behavior, particularly among black girls, more needs to be done within their communities to address the global phenomenon of poverty and the disadvantages that accompany this issue (e.g., community violence).

For instance, community programs and after-school programs using a positive youth development model that serves all youth (rather than just deviant youth) can provide these youths with an opportunity to learn skills and interact with positive adults and nondeviant peers. High-structure, close supervision programs can prevent youth from associating with deviant peers and witnessing violence and redirect them to more prosocial activities. Community-level improvements such as the YMCA, community centers, and boys and girls clubs where youth can congregate with adult supervision would also be beneficial toward achieving these goals.

Enhancing community surveillance, such as neighborhood watch programs, while promoting neighborhood cohesion may also be beneficial in reducing community violence. This would both reduce the violence witnessed by community members and reduce opportunity to participate in violence by more deviant individuals. Using churches, schools, and other community settings as meeting places for discussing concerns within the neighborhoods can help to foster neighborhood cohesion.

In sum, race encompasses a complex sociocultural phe-

nomenon. Race-specific processes that occur at both a neighborhood and a personal level are functioning to differentiate the pathways by which these girls reenter the justice system and engage in violent behaviors. To address issues related to racial disparities in antisocial behaviors, policies must be evaluated and implemented at the community level.

Preeti Chauhan, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City. Before joining the faculty at John Jay, she completed a predoctoral clinical internship at the New York Presbyterian Hospital, Weill Cornell Medical Center. Dr. Chauhan's research interests focus broadly on the intersection of neighborhood and individual-level risk factors for antisocial behavior, psychopathology, and victimization, with an emphasis on understanding their contribution to racial disparities. Direct correspondence about this article to Dr. Chauhan, Department of Psychology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, City University of New York, 445 W. 59th Street, Room 2111, New York, NY 10019, email: pchauhan@jjay.cuny.edu.

Mandi L. Burnette, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the University of Rochester in the Department of Clinical and Social Sciences in Psychology. She conducts research examining how early experiences such as maltreatment contribute to the development of antisocial behaviors (e.g., aggression, substance abuse, prostitution) and other forms of psychopathology (e.g., personality disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder), among female populations. Her research aims to have theoretical and practical applications, with an ultimate goal of informing interventions for women and girls.

N. Dickon Reppucci, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia. He has been Director of its Community Psychology program, with its emphasis on law and children and diversity, since 1976, and been the mentor to more than 50 Ph.D. students. He has received the Distinguished Contributions in Research Award from the Society for Community Research and Action (1998) and the American Psychology/Law Society Mentoring Award (2007). He is author or co-author of four books, including THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN (1988) with Jeffrey Haugaard and PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT THROUGH PARENT EDUCATION (1997) with Preston A. Britner and Jennifer L. Woolard, and more than 150 articles and chapters, including the 2008 co-recipient of the Society for Research on Adolescence Social Policy Award for Best Article—Testimony and Interrogation of Minors: Assumptions of Immaturity and Immorality published in the American Psychologist. His major areas of research are juvenile competence, juvenile justice, and child abuse. He is currently investigating police perceptions of juvenile interrogations and aggressive, violent female juvenile offenders.

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