



## Lessons Learned from a Family-Based Intervention for Court-Involved Girls

*Submitted by: Nicole C. McKenna, Valerie R. Anderson, Laura L. Rubino*

More girls<sup>1</sup> have been arrested and adjudicated in the last 30 years than combined in the time prior. This is due, in part, to an increase in girls being charged for violent offenses (Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014). For simple assault cases involving minor injury or threat of violence, girls accounted for 36% of the overall cases compared to boys in 2010 (Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014). Often these offenses are related to domestic disturbances (e.g., fighting with parents and/or siblings) or violence against peers or romantic partners (Javdani, Sadeh, & Verona, 2011; Stevens, Morash, & Chesney-Lind, 2011).



*Figure 1 Photograph by Andrea Piacquadio on Pexels. CCO.*

### Highlights

**Family-based interventions have the potential to reduce recidivism in girls.**

**Families with girls who are charged with new petitions are associated with poverty, unstructured home life, domestic violence, and neglect.**

**Contextual factors must be addressed in successful interventions.**

“A lot of the programs that the kid goes through is [about the kid], so I am focusing more on the parents and the family as a whole.”

-Juvenile Court Practitioner

We examined a family-based intervention developed for youth with higher risk factors and needs associated with repeat delinquency, such as substance use, peer and family relationships, and antisocial thoughts and behaviors. This program calls for the accountability of whole families rather than just the court-involved girls.

### **Methods**

This study used a mixed-methods approach. We compared one-year recidivism rates between girls who had received the family-based programming with girls who did not receive the intervention. We also conducted interviews with juvenile court practitioners to extend and contextualize the quantitative findings.

### **Results**

- Qualitative data collection revealed that families with girls who receive multiple formal petitions are associated with poverty, unstructured home life, domestic violence, and neglect girls.
- The quantitative differences in girls' recidivism were not statistically significant. Interventions with girls may work in a structured environment, but 90 days of structure may not be enough to change the way families and girls function, especially if they reside in the same disadvantaged neighborhoods.
- Practitioners suggested that family-based court interventions for girls should address trauma and abuse; parenting and pregnancy needs of girls; and girls domestic needs (e.g., prioritizing caring for family/siblings instead of education).

## **HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?**

Family-based models are ideal approaches to examine the social ecology of youth. The ecological model posits that multiple individual and environmental features determine behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

While family programs specifically address how the exosystem, microsystem, and individual system interact, they also address how some of the other layers such as the economy, employment opportunities, political climate, and cultural attitudes and beliefs impact youth and family outcomes in court settings.

---

<sup>1</sup> This study defined “girl” based on the court’s classification of binary gender.

## What Does This Mean For?

**Practice:** Family environment and neighborhoods play a role in girls' court involvement and may act as an important factor to consider for girls' correctional programming.

**Research and Evaluation:** Future research might evaluate how neighborhood factors like poverty, crime rate, and police procedural justice influence family-based programmatic outcomes.

**Social Action:** Most girls in the system are girls of color, particularly Black and African American girls due to systemic racism and oppression. This is called Disproportional Minority Contact (DMC), a combination of racism and sexism on an interpersonal and structural level. Structural barriers impact access to services and experiences within the legal system. Recognizing the intersectional identities of youth and their families and addressing their specific needs will improve family-based interventions within the juvenile legal system. This requires inclusive interventions that encompass the multiple layers of one's identity.

## References

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Javdani, S., Sadeh, N., & Verona, E. (2011). Gendered social forces: A review of the impact of institutionalized factors on women and girls' criminal justice trajectories. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 17*, 161–211.
- Sickmund, M., & Puzzanchera, C. (2014). *Juvenile offenders and victims: 2014 national report*. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice. Available from: <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/nr2014/downloads/NR2014.pdf> [last accessed April 30 2020].
- Stevens, T., Morash, M., & Chesney-Lind, M. (2011). Are girls getting tougher, or are we getting tougher on girls? Probability of arrest and juvenile court oversight in 1980 and 2000. *Justice Quarterly, 28*, 718–744.

*Original Citation: Anderson, V. R., Rubino, L. L., & McKenna, N. C. (2020). Family - based Intervention for Legal System-involved Girls: A Mixed Methods Evaluation. American Journal of Community Psychology.*

*Terms of use: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) It is attributed to the authors and the original version can be found here: <https://www.communitypsychology.com/family-based-intervention-court-involved-girls/>*