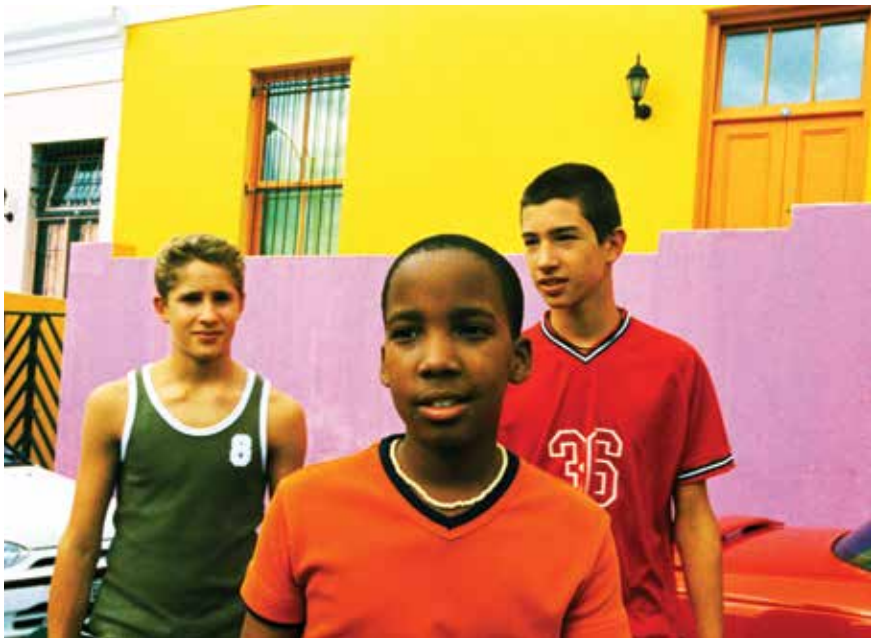
U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
National Institute of Justice

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

CHANGING COURSE

Preventing Gang Membership



Chapter 9. How Can We Prevent Girls From Joining Gangs?

NCJ 243473

How Can We Prevent Girls From Joining Gangs?

Meda Chesney-Lind

- **Girls are in gangs, and in fairly large numbers; in the U.S., girls may constitute one-quarter to one-third of all youth gang members.**
- **Although girls join gangs for many of the same reasons boys do, there are a few gender differences; for example, girls — particularly in abusive families — are more likely than boys to regard a gang as a surrogate family.**
- **Most girls join mixed-sex gangs that are run by boys whose attitudes about girls, sexuality and gender roles cause unique risks and harm to girls.**
- **Strategies and programs aimed at preventing youth from gang-joining must address issues that are unique to girls and the contexts that can lead them to join a gang; such strategies and programs include the need to prevent sexual abuse, strengthen family relationships, provide them with safety in their neighborhoods, help them avoid substance abuse and abusive boyfriends, and improve their skills to delay early sexual activity and parenthood.**

In Brief

The United States has seen a sharp increase in gang problems over the past decade. Gang membership is not an exclusively male phenomenon: According to the most recent national data, girls comprise at least one-quarter of the youth in gangs — and one highly respected study found the percentage among youth in a sample from Denver, for example, to be as high as 46 percent. Unfortunately, these facts are often obscured because those watching the gang problem — particularly law enforcement — typically pay more attention to the behavior of boys than of girls. Another reason for the relative "invisibility" of girls in gangs is that girls enter gangs — and exit from gang activity — at earlier ages than boys.

Gangs can offer both boys and girls a sense of belonging and a perceived sense of fun, excitement and protection. There are some gender differences, however. For boys, more than for girls, a gang may be seen as a place to make money. Girls, by contrast, are more likely to join a gang because of a perceived sense of safety and security that they cannot find at home. Although a gang may provide girls — particularly those from abusive or troubled families — with a sense of a surrogate family, girls in gangs actually face a greater risk of serious delinquency than their nongang counterparts, including gang-fighting, drug use and sales, and weapon-carrying. Gangs also expose girls to greater risk of sexual victimization and violence from other gang members in their own or other rival gangs.

"Gender-informed" prevention efforts are critical to helping prevent girls from joining a gang. Such efforts should focus on:

- Preventing sexual abuse.
- Improving family and peer relationships.

- Helping girls avoid substance abuse and abusive boyfriends.
- Improving skills to delay early sexual activity and parenthood.

Of course, other efforts are likely to decrease the risk of gang-joining for both boys and girls, such as improving the quality of public education, helping them stay in school, and providing youth in economically marginalized communities with safety in their schools and in their neighborhoods. Without effective, gender-responsive prevention efforts, however, there is reason to believe that we will continue to see significant numbers of girls as well as boys joining gangs.

After years of decline, the gang problem in the United States has re-emerged as a challenge, with the number of jurisdictions reporting gang problems increasing in the early 2000s and remaining elevated (see chapter 1).[1] Despite the image of gangs as stereotypically male, studies consistently show that girls are in gangs, and they are there in substantial numbers.

Studies that ask youth themselves about their gang membership tend to find that girls represent between 20 percent and 46 percent of youth in gangs.[2, 3] For example, a national self-report study conducted in 1997 found that girls comprised one-third of youth who reported "belonging to a gang."[4] On the other hand, police estimates of the proportion of female members tend to be low — often considerably less than 10 percent.[1, 5] As Buddy Howell describes in chapter 1 of this book, although boys tend to outnumber girls two to one in gangs nationwide, these figures can vary, depending on the method used to estimate gang members. For example, researchers who study gangs in the field tend to find larger numbers of girls than are revealed through surveys of youth, which are often administered in school.[6, 7] Variations in survey results are best explained by the age of the sample being surveyed: Girls tend to join gangs at a younger age and leave gangs earlier than boys.[8, 9] One study of youth ages 11-15 found that nearly half of the gang members were girls; however, another survey of an older group (ages 13-19) found that only one-fifth were girls.[3] In the sample of young people drawn to evaluate the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program, girls represented 38 percent of those reporting gang membership in the eighth grade (13- to 15-year-olds).[10, 11] This means that, in addition to focusing on girls when seeking to prevent youth from joining gangs, we especially need to focus on the "tweens."

Why Do Girls Join Gangs?

Girls join gangs for many of the same reasons as boys: a perceived sense of fun, respect, protection and affirmation (see chapter 2).[10, 11, 12] In a multistate study of gang youth, many gang-involved girls (and boys) reported having friends in gangs (41 percent of boys and 46 percent of girls) or having a brother or sister in a gang (26 percent of boys and 32 percent of girls). About half of both girls and boys reported joining gangs for "protection." However, boys in the study were significantly more likely to join a gang for money: 47 percent of boys compared with 38 percent of girls.[10, 11] In another study, girls who were gang members reported greater neighborhood disorder and crime, more family disadvantages and peer fighting, less parental attachment, and more concerns about school safety than girls who were not gang members.[12]

Researchers who have looked more closely at the reasons youth give for gang-joining found that girls tended to "tap an emotional or affective aspect of gang membership" more than boys did.[11] This basically means that girls were more likely than boys to agree that "my gang is like family to me." Gang girls were also more likely than gang boys to report that they were lonely in school and with friends, and that they felt isolated from their families. Finally, girls in gangs had lower self-esteem than did boys in gangs, who, the researchers found, "actually appear to have quite positive self-assessments."[10, 11] Girls who are in gangs also have significantly lower self-esteem than girls who are not in gangs.[13]

Researchers, particularly those who have performed ethnographic studies, also note that girls are often around gangs in other roles — such as

girlfriend, sister or daughter — that might put them at risk, even if they are not full-fledged gang members. In a Texas study, for example, researchers found that, "regardless of their relationship to the gang, all the females were prone to some degree of substance use, crime and high-risk sexual behavior."[14]

Although some youth have the *perception* that being in a gang offers fun, excitement and protection, the *reality* is otherwise. For girls as well as boys, gang membership increases delinquent behavior. Here are some self-reported risk behaviors comparing young women who are not in a gang to young women who are in a gang.[2, 3, 13]

	Girls in a gang	Girls not in a gang
Carried concealed weapon	79%	30%
Been in a gang fight	90%	9%
Attacked with a weapon to cause serious injury	69%	28%

Gang-Joining: Risk Factors for Girls

To prevent girls from joining a gang, we need to understand and address the particular risks that girls confront in their families, schools and neighborhoods. Compared with their non-gang-joining peers, girls who join gangs are more likely to:

- Have a history of sexual abuse and trauma.
- Live in a destructive or distraught family.
- Have problematic peer relationships.
- Abuse drugs.
- Live in dangerous neighborhoods and attend unsafe schools.

Abuse and Trauma

To prevent girls from joining gangs, we need to effectively address child maltreatment, particularly child sexual abuse. Girls join gangs, at least in part, because they are suffering abuse at home, their families are deeply troubled, and they are searching for a "surrogate family."[15] Therefore, early gang-membership prevention efforts should focus on families most at risk of physical or sexual child abuse or neglect.

Girls in gangs are far more likely than nongang girls from the same neighborhoods to have been sexually assaulted — 52 percent compared with 22 percent — with "most of the sexual victimization occur[ring] in the context of the family."[2, 3] Seventy-one percent of child sexual abuse victims are girls, and most of this is family-related.[16] Researchers have found that 60 percent of the gang girls were victims of physical or sexual abuse within the family.[17]

Girls in gangs have serious histories of sexual and physical abuse. In one study, researchers found that 62 percent of the girl gang members had been sexually abused or assaulted in their lifetime; three-fourths of the girls (and more than half of the boys) reported suffering lifetime physical abuse.[18] Gangs also continue to put their female members at risk for sexual assault and abuse.[14, 17]

Three-quarters of girls in a 1999 study of gang youth in Los Angeles reported that they had run away from home, more than twice the proportion of male gang members.[19] Running away from home — which has long been correlated with sexual and physical abuse — leads to further criminal involvements (like drug use and sales), affiliating with other deviant peers, and further victimization.[20, 21]

Because child abuse plays such a major role in placing girls at risk for gang membership, programs that prevent this abuse have the potential to reduce gang-joining by girls. There is strong evidence, for example, that early childhood home-visitation programs reduce child maltreatment. In these programs, parents and children (generally, younger than age 2) are visited in their home by nurses, social workers, paraprofessionals or community peers. The parents are given guidance on parenting (such as how to care for and have constructive interactions with young children) and how to strengthen social supports, including linking families with social services. One such program in particular, Nurse-Family Partnerships, has been shown to prevent sexual and physical abuse of girls and to be effective in preventing delinquency in youth born to high-risk mothers.[22]

In 2005, the Task Force on Community Preventative Services — an independent volunteer body of public health and prevention experts appointed by the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — recommended early childhood home-visitation programs for reducing child maltreatment among high-risk families:

> Early childhood home visitation programs are recommended to prevent child maltreatment on the basis of strong evidence that these programs are effective in reducing violence against visited children. Programs delivered by professional visitors (nurses or mental health workers) seem more effective than programs delivered by paraprofessionals, although programs delivered by paraprofessionals for ≥2 years also appear to be effective in reducing child maltreatment. Home visitation programs in our review were offered to teenage parents; single mothers; families of low socioeconomic status (SES); families with very low birth-weight infants; parents previously investigated for child maltreatment; and parents with alcohol, drug, or mental health problems."[23]

For more information on The Community Guide, a resource that contains recommendations by the Task Force, see http://www.thecommunityguide.org/violence/home/homevisitation.html.

Destructive or Distraught Families

To prevent girls from joining a gang, it is important to strengthen family and peer relationships and, when appropriate, enhance connections with other adults who can serve as parent figures. This is particularly true in communities with high rates of crime and violence, where pressure to join a gang can be intense.

Some girls in gangs feel isolated from their families and they regard the gang as an alternative family. Also, some girls who join gangs report highly problematic relationships with their families, with both mothers and fathers. In fact, girls in gangs are significantly more likely than nongang girls to say they have less attachment to their mothers, less interest in talking with their mothers, and less parental monitoring.[24] In one California study of girls in the juvenile justice system who reported more than six types of emotional abuse, all but one were in a gang.[25]

Thirty-two percent of girls (26 percent of boys) say that one of the reasons they joined a gang is because they had a brother or a sister in the gang. This suggests that the families themselves can contribute, for many girls, to the risk of gang-joining.[10, 11]

When developing strategies and programs to help prevent girls from joining a gang, it is crucial to consider important cultural contexts. Some girls experience the strain of immigration in addition to the pressures produced by poverty. (See the sidebar "Girls, Gangs, and Cultural Context.")

We also must address the need of some girls to be protected *from* their families. A study conducted in Hawaii showed that some girls turned to gangs in response to family violence, saying that the gang provided instruction and experience in fighting back physically and emotionally.[18] Other researchers have found that gangs can provide girls with an escape from duties that are assigned by their families, such as taking care of siblings and housework.[17, 26]

Problematic Peer Relationships

Many girls join a gang because they have friends in the gang. One study found that 46 percent of girls (41 percent of boys) gave this as one of the reasons they joined a gang.[10, 11] However, most girls who are in gangs are in mixed-sex gangs; one researcher estimated that 88 percent of the gang girls she studied were in gangs with boys and young men.[2, 3] Because mixed-sex gangs tend to be male-dominated in both structure and activities, girls may be at considerable risk not only for greater delinquent behavior but also for further sexual assault and domestic violence.[6, 27, 28]

Despite the fact that some girls look to a gang as a surrogate family, the reality is that gangs rarely offer the "protection" girls may be seeking. Not only does gang life increase the risk of delinquency, some girls are "trained" into the gang, meaning they are raped by multiple male gang members as a form of "initiation."[14, 17] Male gang members may also seriously endanger girls by including them in very violent crimes, such as drive-by shootings, or asking girls to serve as "mules," decoys or couriers in drug- or weapon-carrying; they are also used as bait in "setting up" rival gang members.[14, 28]

Girls, Gangs and Cultural Context

Cultural context is an important factor in understanding why some girls join a gang. For example, Latina and Hispanic girls must negotiate the traditional gender-role ideologies of machismo and marianismo. Machismo dictates that Latino boys and men should be tough, sexually assertive, and dominating; marianismo stresses that girls and women should be submissive and passive in their relationships with boys and men.[29]

Young Latinas often resent such constraints. In one study of Latina and Portuguese mothers and daughters in the late 1990s, researchers found that some Latina girls chafed at controls imposed on them, saying that their parents were "too concerned" about their safety. They also reported feeling constrained and frustrated as they saw their mothers being bound by a culture that expected them to "do everything for everybody." The girls said that, if they complained about people taking advantage of their mothers, their mothers got angry.[30]

Many African-American girls must learn to cope with both sexism and racism, to say nothing of dangerous communities. Research has shown that some African-American mothers teach their daughters "race-related resistance strategies," like how not to fall prey to corrosive effects of the white standard of American beauty.[31] Black mothers may also ensure that their daughters learn two cultural scripts: one for living in the white world and another for living as an African-American.[32] Other research has found that because many African-American girls grow up in very violent neighborhoods, their women may also teach their daughters to "physically defend themselves" because they do not want them to become "a statistic."[36]

In fact, conflicts between African-American mothers and their daughters might well escalate precisely *because* the girls learn resistance strategies from their mothers. As Dr. Nikki Jones, from the University of California at Santa Barbara, has noted in her book, *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner City Violence,* published in 2010, African-American mothers defended their attempts to curtail their daughters' "freedom" by pointing to the "often hostile and dangerous environments" that their teens lived in as well as the fact that "they were also less likely to be given a break when they err than white teens."[36]

Female African-American gang members differ from Latina and Hispanic gang members in one very interesting way: how they feel about their futures, especially heterosexual marriage. Seventy-five percent of African-American girls — and only 43 percent of the Latinas — agreed with the statement, "The way men are today, I'd rather raise my kids myself." Similarly, when asked about the statement, "All a woman needs to straighten out her life is to find a good man," 29 percent of Latinas — and none of the African-American girls — agreed.[37]

Prevention efforts must be shaped by the cultures in which they operate; they must be cognizant of the dynamics between girls and their mothers, in particular, because research shows that, although these relationships are important, they are likely to be strained with respect to girls who are at the greatest risk.[24]

Some girls in gangs also have problematic relationships with other girls. Girls in mixed-sex gangs often fight with other girls because of jealousy over boys.[26, 33] And, because girls in gangs generally identify more with males than with females, they may:

- Tend to ignore male violence toward girls.[34]
- Blame other girls for male infidelity.[35]
- Use their sex appeal to "set up" rival gang members.[14, 17]
- Set up other girls for sexual assault.[14, 34]

All this can lead to a system of sexual inequality that encourages male violence and contributes to girls seeing themselves through the eyes of males. Because relationships are so important to girls — and because girls say that they are drawn

to gangs for a sense of belonging — it is important that prevention programs focus on promoting a girl's access to positive peer groups — like culturally appropriate, school-based empowerment programs — while giving them the skills to critically challenge destructive cultural themes.[38] Prevention strategies that work with potential bystanders or witnesses to sexual violence or dating violence also have the potential to change norms and behaviors by addressing bystander behavior before, during and after violence occurs.[39]

Substance Abuse

One of the top reasons that both girls and boys give for joining gangs is "for fun," and ethnographic research suggests that this "fun" often includes drug use and abuse. To prevent girls from joining gangs, we need to prevent substance abuse. Gang membership is clearly associated with increased substance abuse and the sale of drugs. Comparing girls in gangs with their nongang peers in the same community:[2, 3]

	Girls in a gang	Girls not in a gang
Smoked marijuana	98%	52%
Sold marijuana	58%	11%
Sold crack cocaine	56%	7%

A study of risks associated with gang involvement among Mexican-American girls found that a cultural view of them as "hoodrats" — girls who are regarded as sexually available to gang members — put girls at unique risk.[14] Male gang members reported two kinds of parties: those with family members and "good girls" (girlfriends and relatives), where drugs and alcohol were present but use was moderate; and those attended by gang members and hoodrats at which there was heavy alcohol and drug use, and the primary purpose was to get loaded and high.[14] For girls, such a "party" can sometimes include gang rape, which is often justified by the fact that the girls were high or because no one "knew her" and she was drunk.[14, 17] One study found that, in some mixed-sex gangs with older men, girls are given drugs, which produces the odd anomaly that more girls than boys were exposed to more expensive drugs like methamphetamines.[40]

It is important to keep in mind that substance abuse can also be a response to trauma, including abuse at home, and, for some runaway girls, this can be magnified by the trauma of street life — all of which can be a risk for gang-joining. Prevention efforts should also focus on helping youth avoid or cope with depression and trauma so that girls are not joining gangs for protection and using drugs to self-medicate. One study found that female juvenile offenders were three times more likely than girls who were not in the system to show clinical symptoms of anxiety and depression.[41] The links between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and drug use are certainly more pronounced in girls than in boys. In another study, 40 percent of substance-abusing girls were experiencing PTSD compared with 12 percent of boys.[42]

Urban Women Against Substance Abuse is an example of an effective program that uses many of the girl-oriented gang-membership prevention elements discussed above. Initially focused on reducing substance abuse among African-American girls, the program explores attitudes and consequences of substance abuse and teaches alternative stress-reduction techniques. It also strengthens mother-daughter communication and relationships through interventions for the girls, parallel curricula for mothers and monthly mother-daughter sharing sessions. The program also includes home visits, recreation and cultural activities. Short-term effects showed increased school attendance, healthy substance-use attitudes, increased control over sexual expression (sexual self-efficacy) and improved mother-daughter communication. Longer-term follow-up study revealed that the girls in the program maintained the same level of healthy substance-use attitudes, while girls in the control group experienced increased substance use and deterioration in substance-use attitudes.[43]

Dangerous Neighborhoods and Unsafe Schools

To prevent girls from joining gangs, we must take very seriously the deteriorated state of neighborhoods and communities. We know, for example, that in some communities, the ability to fight, even for girls, is considered desirable and, at a minimum, youth are encouraged to know how to negotiate neighborhoods saturated with gang

members and gang activity.[36] Remember that the reason mostly frequently cited by girls for why they join gangs is to seek protection in these conditions.[10, 11] A key to effective prevention, then, is to address the contexts that give rise to gang membership among girls and impede the success of prevention strategies.

In a hostile San Francisco Bay street environment, girl gang members explained that they were violent with each other in an attempt to look tough and protect themselves. As low-income girls of color and given the constraints of their location — on the streets dominated by powerful males — fighting brought these girls status and honor and made it possible for them to confirm they were "decent" and "nobody's fool."[44]

In fact, from Maine to inner-city Philadelphia to a Michigan deindustrialized town, some families tacitly support violence as means for girls' self-protection and so that people will not disrespect them and they can "hold their own."[45, 46, 47, 48] For girls who are violent in response to their environment, it is critical that strategies and programs for gang-membership prevention address the environment. It simply is not enough only to teach girls to "cope" or "control their anger" without providing them a safe place.

Preventing truancy and school dropout is key to addressing gang-joining for both girls and boys. In fact, attending inadequate and dangerous schools is a common theme among girls who are involved (or suspected of being involved) in a gang.[49] Girls in gangs are far more likely than nongang girls to say that they feel unsafe at school, to report gang fights and racial conflict at school, and to be less committed to their academic work.[13]

Many young African-American girls report that their teachers routinely ethnically stereotype them, punishing them for being "loud" and "insufficiently feminine." Latinas report that they are ignored and assumed to be headed for dropping out and early motherhood.[49, 50]

Ethnographies of public schools that serve impoverished communities powerfully document precisely how these issues arise in the schooling of girls at risk for gang membership.[50, 51] During elementary school, young African-American girls are often praised by their teachers for their "social maturity," while their white counterparts are encouraged to work on academic skills. By high school, however, the assertiveness of African-American girls is often seen as something that must be "squelched" for the sake of order in the classroom. For example, in her seminal work, *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap,* Peggy Orenstein argues that, while African-American girls reach out to their teachers more than white girls (or boys of any race), they are "most frequently rebuffed, they actually receive far less attention," and end up "pressed into disengaged silence."[51]

Orenstein also argues that sexual harassment of girls "has an accepted, codified venue in gangs" and that teachers routinely ignore boys' sexual and physical bullying of girls (regardless of their ethnicity), leaving girls to have to fend for themselves, which creates an atmosphere in these marginalized schools of "equal opportunity abusiveness."[51]

Finally, the links between educational failure and gang membership are clear: Low-achieving students reported greater awareness of gangs, were more often asked to join gangs, reported more friends in gangs and, most importantly, were more likely to say they are in a gang.[52] Therefore, to prevent girls from joining gangs, we must address the failure of public schools to pay attention to girls and address girls' problems. Schools tend to shortchange girls compared with boys: For example, girls are less frequently called on by teachers, they are encouraged to be dependent, their assertiveness is punished, and they are shunted into subjects and majors that are less financially remunerative.[53, 54] For many girls at risk of gang-joining, however, such failure is amplified by racism. Some schools ignore or discriminate against girls — particularly girls of color — and focus on obedience, order and control instead of on creativity and developing challenging intellectual and social environments.[50, 51, 52]

In totality, research on the quality of schooling available to girls in gang-saturated neighborhoods argues for school-based initiatives that support girls' resilience and promote their attachment to school. For example, the increase of girls' participation in sports over the past few decades as a result of Title IX — and the growing body of research suggesting good outcomes for girls engaged in sports — is an important example of how such programming empowers girls.[55, 56]

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: FEMALE INTERVENTION TEAM

INTERVIEW WITH MARIAN DANIEL

Marian Daniel is the founder of the Female Intervention Team (FIT), which operates within the traditional probation structure of the Maryland Department of Juvenile Justice. FIT offers a good example of how to go beyond the superficial adaption of an existing program when truly trying to address the unique needs of girls.

Ms. Daniel recently retired as Maryland's Director of Girls Services for Maryland's Department of Juvenile Services; however, she still works with FIT, which, in addition to providing services for girls in Baltimore, offers training on gender-responsive programming in other Maryland jurisdictions. Although FIT might be considered more of an "intervention" than a classic gang-membership prevention program, it is highlighted here to illustrate some of the core principles of gender-responsive programming. FIT focuses on girls' unique challenges (including family trauma) and it builds on their need for positive relationships. The program also uses "natural" girl allies and resources, and does so with a clever use of existing resources. In this interview, Ms. Daniel reflects on the two decades that FIT has been in existence.

I know you have some strong opinions about how we, as a nation, have historically worked with girls.

For years, people assumed that all you had to do to make a program designed for boys work for girls was to paint the walls pink and take out the urinals. Even in my facility, they painted the girls' walls pink in a boys' institution and said, "So, okay, now we have a girls program."

Can you describe some of the FIT programs?

We have family counseling for teens, their parents and, in some groups, grandparents. Most groups are designed for 8- to 15-year-old girls. Counselors strive to provide a nurturing but firm environment. We also offer tutoring. We recruit guest speakers from the community to share their stories, showing clients that females like them can overcome abuse and other difficult life circumstances. Our Rite of Passage program gives older teens a positive introduction to womanhood and opportunities for community service.

Tell me about the girls in FIT.

The typical girl in FIT is a 16-year-old African-American from a single-parent family. A large percentage have a sexually transmitted infection and other chronic problems. Nearly one in five is pregnant. Their most typical offense was simple assault. Some were in a gang, and that presented a special challenge, since the gang mentality is a challenge. Virtually all came from impoverished neighborhoods, and they were in danger of going further into the juvenile justice system. But I knew, drawing on my experience as a probation officer, that the girls needed someone to listen, really listen to them.

Is it true that FIT began with no money?

Yes — and I think it's important to understand that sometimes it's not all about money or saying, "We can't afford to do it." It's about changing the way that we do business. We had so many girls and so many different probation officers — and nobody really understood the complexity of the few girls they had in their caseloads. I believed that if we had just one group of workers, we could train them to identify issues early. I hoped that, by working intensely with the girls, they wouldn't go so deeply into the system. I knew we could do this with the probation officers we had — but how? How could we clear our probation officers of the boys in their caseloads? Being a probation officer myself, I knew many probation officers felt that working with girls was far more difficult than working with boys. Girls were often seen as a burden within the typical caseload.

Policy Implications

Girls who are at risk for gang involvement have histories of abuse, strained family relationships (particularly with their mothers), and troubled relationships with their peers (particularly boys); they attend unsafe schools and live in dangerous neighborhoods. Despite this reality, media portrayals of girls in gangs often show a glowering girl, peering over the barrel of a gun and looking very much like her male counterpart.[57] This tends to fuel a climate where the victims of poverty, racism and sexism can be blamed for their own problems — and this, in turn, can be used to "justify" society's inattention to the genuine underlying problems of marginalized girls.

Such inattention to girls' needs comes at a cost. The trends we are currently seeing — of girls' increasing involvement in the criminal justice system — suggest that we are failing to prevent girls from joining gangs. In recent years, the rates of arrest, detention and incarceration of girls — particularly for violent offenses — have skyrocketed. For example:

- In the mid-1970s, only 15 percent of juveniles arrested were female; four decades later, it is nearly one-third.[58, 59]
- Between 1996 and 2005, there was an 18 percent increase in court-ordered residential placement of girls for assault.[60]

How did you approach that challenge?

Girls were seen as so much of a burden that the FIT program director offered staff not working in the FIT unit the "opportunity" to transfer one girl's case for every 10 boys' cases they accepted. We put up an ad, almost as a joke: 'Wanted, 10 boys for 1 girl.' We didn't think they would be willing to take that many — and we thought we'd need to bargain — but, instead, within three weeks, the caseloads were shifted, and I had created a female-only caseload for my band of volunteers.

How did you address the lack of services for girls?

We didn't have a lot of money for training, but I knew that there were a lot of girl-serving organizations in Baltimore, so I reached out to them. Everybody was willing to lend a hand. One of my first successes was to get training from the Maryland Infant and Toddlers Program, which helped the staff understand the unique needs of pregnant and parenting teens. I also reached out to African-American organizations in the city. FIT and the Urban League staff conducted a series of information sessions covering choices, resolving conflicts, and getting along in the home and community for girls who came to the office for weekly group meetings at no cost to the state. These proved to be so popular that girls started bringing along their friends. I also knew that folks at Johns Hopkins [University] might be interested in working with my girls, so I reached out to them and got family planning services for a year at no cost to the girls or their families.

How has FIT evolved over the years?

After receiving a technical assistance grant from the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, FIT added specific components to address the girls' educational challenges. We assessed whether girls were being properly supported by the educational system and also provided tutoring assistance. The program continued to address the girls' health problems but also strengthened its treatment resources. We did a lot of the counseling, but, as probation officers, we did not take on issues outside of our expertise. We brought in trauma specialists or sent the girls to those services. Finally, we reached out to the Girl Scouts, and the troop that was started is among the most popular groups at FIT.

You talk about breaking the cycle that often "pits a girl against a judge" — what do you mean by that?

As probation officers for the girls, FIT's case managers make formal recommendations to the judge regarding the girl's dispositions. FIT workers have helped to break the cycle that often pits a girl against the judge and results in her detention for failure to abide by the judge's disposition — which, in turn, often lands girls in detention. As a result of this shift in the way of doing probation, in the two years following its establishment, FIT saw a 50-percent reduction in the number of girls committed to the state's secure facility. The following year, the decline was 95 percent, according to an in-house evaluation of the program.

What changes have you noticed over the years with respect to the girls FIT works with?

The girls we now see are bringing new challenges. There is the terrible problem of urban poverty, and these girls have been exposed to high levels of violence and abuse. I think all we have to do is look at the environments they come from — it's what they see. Our children, our young people, have seen more than I've seen in my 68 years of life. At the heart of their problems, though, is family dysfunction, so the real work is to help that family system heal, if possible. We also need broader societal concern about the high levels of violence in low-income communities.

- Between 1997 and 2006, there was a 12.8 percent decrease in boys' incarcerations (in both detention and residential facilities) compared with only a 3.7 percent decrease in girls' incarcerations.[61]

One study showed that, overall, girls were incarcerated for less serious offenses than boys. About half (46 percent) of girls who were committed for a "person" offense were committed for simple assault — compared with 22 percent of boys.[4] Many of these are arguments between girls and their parents or are minor schoolyard arguments.[62, 63] Marian Daniel, the founder of FIT (see the sidebar "In The Spotlight: Female Intervention Team"), says that these can be situations where the girl gets into a "push/pull" and is arrested for assault. "That's not to simplify things," Daniel said, "but some of these fights have no business coming into juvenile court."

All of this suggests that early and comprehensive gang-membership prevention efforts are needed to address the underlying gang-joining risks for girls — and we need such efforts to be part of a broader strategy to prevent girls' delinquency. Such work will be challenging, however, given years of inattention to girls' programming and the consequent lack of robust, gender-informed program models.[43] We urgently need strategies to help the girls who are at the greatest risk for gang-joining, particularly those who may turn to

a gang for "protection" or a sense of belonging. The success of programs like Urban Women Against Substance Abuse and FIT demonstrate that we can take preventive action that is gender-responsive and culturally appropriate. Frankly, without such programs, there is no reason to believe that the trends regarding the involvement of girls in the criminal justice system will abate.

Certainly, such work will be challenging, particularly in the current economic climate, where proposals to spend money are very carefully scrutinized. This is precisely why Marian Daniel's words are so relevant: Sometimes, it's not all about adding new money. As Daniel's experience showed, targeting girls in efforts to prevent gang-joining does not have to mean spending more money — it *can* just mean that we change the way we do business.

Conclusion

Despite the image of gangs as overwhelmingly male, between one-quarter and one-third of gang members are female. Therefore, gang-membership prevention efforts must focus on girls as well as boys.

Despite the fact that girls join gangs for many of the same reasons boys do (fun, respect, protection), there are crucial gender differences in terms of gang-joining and of the consequences of gang membership. Most girls end up in gangs that are male-focused and male-dominated, and there is scant evidence that they provide girls with either the physical or emotional safety they seek. Rather, these girls are more likely to be involved in criminal activities than are girls from their neighborhoods who are not in gangs, and they are also at substantial risk for further victimization.

Strategies and programs for gang-membership prevention must be gender-informed. This can be done by preventing child abuse through working with high-risk parents. Strategies and programs should also seek to reknit frayed connections between girls and their families. We must implement effective, culturally informed, school-based prevention programs, particularly those that assist girls in achieving academic success, especially in schools in gang-infested neighborhoods. Combined with programming that works on issues that girls share with boys, these additional gender-informed prevention efforts can offer powerful tools to help girls avoid gang membership and overcome the many challenges in their environments.

About the Author

Meda Chesney-Lind

Meda Chesney-Lind teaches Women's Studies at the University of Hawaii. Dr. Chesney-Lind is nationally recognized for her work on women and crime, and her testimony before Congress was crucial in building national support of gender-responsive programming for girls in the juvenile justice system. Her most recent book on girls' use of violence, *Fighting for Girls* (co-edited with Nikki Jones), won an award from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency for "focusing America's attention on the complex problems of the criminal and juvenile justice systems."

Endnotes

1. National Gang Center. National Gang Survey Analysis. Available at http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Survey-Analysis/Defining-Gangs. Accessed on May 15, 2012.

2. Miller J. Young women in street gangs: Risk factors, delinquency, and victimization risk. In: Reed W, Decker SH, eds., *Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, 2002:68-105.

3. Esbensen F-A, Huizinga D. Gangs, drugs, and delinquency in a survey of youth. *Criminology* 1993; 31:565-589.

4. Snyder H, Sickmund M. *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2006.

5. Curry GD, Ball RA, Fox RJ. *Gang Crime and Law Enforcement Recordkeeping.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1994.

6. Moore J. *Going Down to the Barrio: Homeboys and Homegirls in Change.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991.

7. Chesney-Lind M, Hagedorn JM, eds. *Female Gangs in America: Essays on Girls, Gangs and Gender.* Chicago, IL: Lakeview Press, 1999.

8. Peterson D, Miller J, Esbensen F-A. The impact of sex composition on gang member attitudes and behavior. *Criminology* 2001; 39:411-440.

9. Williams K, Curry GD, Cohen MI. Gang prevention programs for female adolescents: An evaluation. In: Reed W, Decker SH, eds., *Responding to Gangs: Evaluation and Research.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2002:225-263.

10. Esbensen F-A, Winfree LT. Race and gender differences between gang and non-gang youth: Results from a multi-site survey. *Justice Q.* 1998; 15:505-525.

11. Esbensen F-A, Deschenes EP, Winfree LT. Differences between gang girls and gang boys: Results from a multi-site survey. *Youth Soc.* 1999; 31:27-53.

12. Bell KE. Gender and gangs: A quantitative comparison. *Crime Delinq.* 2009; 55(3):363-387.

13. Deschenes EP, Esbensen F-A. Violence among girls: Does gang membership make a difference? In: Chesney-Lind M, Hagedorn J, eds., *Female Gangs in America.* Chicago, IL: Lake View Press, 1999.

14. Cepeda A, Valdez A. Risk behaviors among young Mexican-American gang-associated females: Sexual relations, partying, substance use, and crime. *J Adolesc Res.* 2003; 18:90-106.

15. Joe-Laidler K, Hunt G. Violence and social organization in female gangs. *Soc Justice* 1997; 24(4):148-169.

16. Finkelhor D, Baron L. Risk factors for child sexual abuse. *J Interpers Violence* 1986; 1:43-71.

17. Portillos EL. The social construction of gender in the barrio. In: Chesney-Lind M, Hagedorn J, eds., *Female Gangs in America: Essays on Girls, Gangs and Gender.* Chicago, IL: Lake View Press, 1999:232-244.

18. Joe K, Chesney-Lind M. Just every mother's angel: An analysis of gender and ethnic variations in youth gang membership. *Gend Soc.* 1995; 9(4):408-430.

19. Moore J. Gang members' families. In: Chesney-Lind M, Hagedorn J, eds., *Female Gangs in America: Essays on Girls, Gangs and Gender.* Chicago, IL: Lake View Press, 1999.

20. Chen X, Tyler KA, Whitbeck LB, Hoyt DR. Early sex abuse, street adversity, and drug use among female homeless and runaway adolescents in the Midwest. *J Drug Issues* 2004; 34: 1-21.

21. Tyler KA, Hoyt DR, Whitbeck LB, Cauce AM. The impact of childhood sexual abuse on later sexual victimization among runaway youth. *J Res Adolesc.* 2001; 1:151-176.

22. Olds D, Henderson CR, Cole R, et al. Long-term effects of nurse home visitation on children's criminal and antisocial behavior. *JAMA* 1998; 280(14):1238-1244.

23. Task Force on Community Preventive Services. Recommendations to reduce violence through early childhood home visitation, therapeutic foster care, and firearms laws. *Am J Prev Med.* 2005; 28(2S1):6-10.

24. Deschenes EP, Esbensen F-A.Violence and gangs: Gender differences in perceptions and behavior. *J Quant Criminol.* 1999; 15:63-96.

25. Acoca L, Dedel K. *No Place to Hide: Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Girls in the California Juvenile Justice System.* San Francisco, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 1998.

26. Hagedorn JM, Devitt ML. Fighting females: The social construction of the female gang. In: Chesney-Lind M, Hagedorn JM, eds., *Female Gangs in America: Essays on Girls, Gangs and Gender.* Chicago, IL: Lake View Press, 1999.

27. Campbell A. *The Girls in the Gang.* Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, 1984.

28. Miller J. *One of the Guys: Girls, Gangs and Gender.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.

29. Marin BV. HIV prevention in the Hispanic community: Sex, culture, and empowerment. *J Transcult Nurs.* 2003; 14:186-192.

30. Taylor, J. Cultural stories: Latina and Portuguese daughters and mothers. In: Leadbeater B, Way N, eds., *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities.* New York, NY: New York University Press, 1996:117-131.

31. Ward J. Raising resisters: The role of truth telling in the psychological development of African American girls. In: Leadbeater B, Way N, eds., *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities.* New York, NY: New York University Press, 1996:85-99.

32. Cauce A, Hiraga Y, Graves D, Gonzales N, Ryan-Finn K, Grove K. African American mothers and their adolescent daughters: Closeness, conflict, and control. In: Leadbeater B, Way N, eds., *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities.* New York, NY: New York University Press, 1996:100-116.

33. Campbell A. 1999. Self definition by rejection: The case of gang girls. In: Chesney-Lind M, Hagedorn JM, eds., *Female Gangs in America: Essays on Girls, Gangs, and Gender.* Chicago, IL: Lake View Press, 1999:100-117.

34. Dennehy G, Newbold G. *The Girls in the Gang.* Auckland, New Zealand: Reed Publishing, 2001.

35. Artz S. *Sex, Power and the Violent School Girl.* Toronto, Canada: Trifolium Books, 1998.

36. Jones N. *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner City Violence.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010.

37. Moore J, Hagedorn J. What happens to the girls in the gang? In: Huff RC, ed., *Gangs in America.* 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996.

38. Brown LM. *Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls.* New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003.

39. Coker AL, Cook-Craig PG, Williams CM, Fisher BS, Clear ER, Garcia LS, Hegge LM. Evaluation of Green Dot: An active bystander intervention to reduce sexual violence on college campuses. *Violence Against Women* 2011; 17:777-796.

40. Pasko LJ. *The Female Juvenile Offender in Hawaii: Understanding Gender Differences in Arrests, Adjudications, and Social Characteristics of Juvenile Offenders.* Honolulu, HI: State of Hawaii: Department of the Attorney General, 2006.

41. Kataoka S, Zima B, Dupre D, Moreno K, Yang X, McCracken J. Mental health problems and service use among female juvenile offenders. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 2001; 40(5):549-555.

42. Deyken EY, Buka SL. Prevalence and risk factors for posttraumatic stress disorder among chemically dependent adolescents. *Am J Psychiatry* 1997; 154:752-757.

43. Chesney-Lind M, Morash M, Stevens T. Girls' troubles, girls' delinquency, and gender responsive programming: A review. *Aust NZ J Criminol.* 2008; 41(1):162-189.

44. Hunt G, Joe-Laidler K. Situations of violence in the lives of girl gang members. *Health Care Women Int.* 2001; 22:363-384.

45. Brown LM. *Raising Their Voices: The Politics of Girls' Anger.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.

46. Ness CD. Why girls fight: Female youth violence in the inner city. *Ann Am Acad Pol Soc Sci.* 2004; 595:32-48.

47. Leitz L. Girl fights: Exploring females' resistance to educational structures. *Int J Sociol Soc Policy* 2003; 23(11):15-43.

48. Tapper K, Boulton M. Social representations of physical, verbal and indirect aggression in children: Sex and age differences. *Aggress Behav.* 2000; 26:442-454.

49. Morris EW. "Tuck in that shirt!": Race, class, gender, and discipline in an urban school. *Sociol Perspect.* 2005; 48:25-48.

50. Kelly D. *Last Chance High: How Girls and Boys Drop In and Out of Alternative Schools.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993.

51. Orenstein P. *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap.* New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994.

52. Lopez EM, Wishard A, Gallimore R, Rivera W. Latino high school students' perceptions of gangs and crews. *J Adolesc Res.* 2006; 21(3):299-318.

53. Sadker M, Sadker D. *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls.* New York, NY: Touchstone, 1995.

54. Reay D. "Spice girls," "nice girls," "girlies," and "tomboys": General discourses, girls' cultures and feminities in the primary classroom. *Gender Educ.* 2001; 1(2):153-167.

55. Miller KE, Sabo DF, Farrell M, Barnes G. Sports, sexual behavior, contraceptive use, and pregnancy among female and male high school students: Testing cultural resource theory. *Sociol Sport J.* 1999; 16:366-387.

56. Stevenson B. Beyond the classroom: Using Title IX to measure the return to high school sports. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 15728, February 2010. Available at http:// www.nber.org/papers/w15728.pdf. Accessed on September 7, 2011.

57. Leslie C, Biddle N, Rosenberg D, Wayne J. Girls will be girls. *Newsweek,* August 2, 1993:44.

58. Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States, 2007.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 2008. Available at http://www2.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/index.html. Accessed on September 7, 2011.

59. Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States, 2009.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, September 2010. Available at http://www2.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2009/data/table_33.html. Accessed on September 7, 2011.

60. Sickmund M, Sladky A, Kang W. *Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1985-2005.* Available at http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/. Accessed on September 7, 2011.

61. Sickmund M, Sladky TJ, Kang W, Puzzanchera C. *Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement.* Available at http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/. Accessed on September 7, 2011.

62. Buzawa ES, Hotaling GT. The impact of relationship status, gender, and minor status in the police response to domestic assaults. *Vict Offender* 2006; 1(4):323-360.

63. Wallace JM, Goodkind S, Wallace CM, Bachman JG. Racial, ethnic, and gender differences in school discipline among U.S. high school students: 1991-2005. *Negro Educ Rev.* 2008; 59(1-2):47-62.