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# **The Nature of Female Juvenile Offender Involvement in Domestic Violence-Related Offending**

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A great deal has been made of the increases in girls' violent offending over the last decade. The number of female juvenile arrests for violent UCR Index offenses was up 101% in 1997 from 1988, and up 131% for "other assaults" (Federal Bureau of Investigations, 1997). While some have characterized these findings as an indication of a new wave of "bad girls" and a substantive behavioral change on the part of young women in America, others have focused on the etiology and circumstances distinguishing girls' violent offending from that of their male counterparts (Chesney-Lind, 1999; Belknap, 2002; Dembo and Schmeidler, 1993; Albrecht, 1996; Widom, 2000). A consistent theme emerging from the research is the prevalence of prior victimization in the lives of these girls. Estimates suggest that between 60 and 80 percent of delinquent girls have previously been exposed to violence (Silbert and Pines, 1983; McCormack, Janus, and Burgess, 1986; American Correctional Association, 1990; and Miller, 1990, 1992, 1995). The extent to which such violence subsequently impacts girls' involvement in violent offending, has only recently gained attention (Chesney-Lind, 1999 and Widom, 2000). Widom (2001) reports that a history of abuse or neglect increases the likelihood of arrest for a violent crime by 30 percent. Researchers have yet to adequately explore the role domestic violence plays in the violent offending of girls and whether this differs significantly from boys' violent behavior.

This Bulletin reports empirical findings from an examination of juvenile cases involving male and female domestic violence offenders in the state of Florida. The intent of the research is to explore the situational contexts underlying recent increases in girls' violent offending.

## **Female Juvenile Offenders in Florida**

The current analysis builds upon the OJJDP-funded Florida Delinquent Girls Research Project (Winokur, 1999; Winokur and Jackson, 2001; Winokur, 2002), administered by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). The study examined the backgrounds, characteristics, and needs of girls committed to secure residential facilities in the Florida juvenile justice system. In-depth interviews with a random sample of girls incarcerated in moderate-risk and high-risk juvenile facilities were conducted, as well as interviews with their probation officers, commitment managers, and program directors. Many interesting themes emerged and in many cases patterns evident in the girls' interviews were paralleled in concurrent quantitative analyses of their offense and placement histories. Among the major themes was a strong pattern of severe family dysfunction, and in particular, domestic violence and physical abuse. It was clear that family violence played a major role in many girls' initial and continued involvement in the juvenile justice

system. In fact, 10% of the girls interviewed were committed for a domestic violence offense and 26% reported being arrested at least once for domestic violence. Among girls with arrests for domestic violence, the majority had been both physically and sexually abused.

Family violence also appears, in some cases, to have been a significant pathway to girls' involvement in the juvenile justice system. For instance, several girls described being arrested as the perpetrators in domestic incidents in which, based on their descriptions, they were in fact the victims. Some girls' arrest records were exclusively, or almost exclusively, confined to incidents involving family violence. Interviews with probation officers and commitment managers revealed that the professionals working with these girls were often aware of severe family problems and violence. Quantitative analyses based on juvenile justice records revealed that relative to boys, girls committed directly to a secure residential program for their first placement, were significantly more likely to come from families assessed as having serious dysfunction.

Based on these earlier analyses, it appears that abuse, family violence, and the official response to these incidents may contribute to recent increases in girls' violent offending. Additionally, in 1994 the Florida Legislature passed a law allowing juvenile justice personnel to place youths involved in domestic violence disputes, who otherwise would not meet detention criteria, in a juvenile detention facility ((Florida Statutes § 985.213 (2)(b)(3)). The current research examines the comparative impact of this law on male and female youths. Quantitative analyses of cases involving domestic violence offenders are contrasted here with those of non-domestic violence offenders. In addition, the study includes further examination of the in-depth interviews with delinquent girls conducted as part of the Florida Delinquent Girls Research Project. The following research questions are addressed:

1. What proportion of violent offending among referred juveniles is domestic? Are there significant differences by gender?
2. What is the offense history profile for youths referred for domestic violence-related offenses? Are there gender differences?
3. What is the prevalence of prior referrals for violent offenses among youths referred for domestic violence offenses? Are there gender differences?
4. Are juveniles referred for domestic violence more likely than those with no domestic violence-related referrals to have dependency records (i.e., abuse or neglect records)? Are there differences by gender?
5. For females, what are the qualitative circumstances surrounding domestic violence referrals?
6. What percentage of youth placed in secure detention are detained for domestic violence? Are there significant differences by gender?
7. In profiling male and female domestic violence offenders, which youth are most likely to successfully reintegrate into the community and what are the correlates of this success?

## **Domestic Violence Laws**

Under Florida law, a youth who would not otherwise meet criteria for detention may be committed to secure detention if the juvenile is charged with a domestic violence related offense<sup>1</sup> (Florida Statutes § 985.213 (2001)). Domestic violence is defined by Florida statute as:

"...any assault, aggravated assault, battery, aggravated battery, sexual assault, sexual battery, stalking, aggravated stalking, kidnapping, false imprisonment, or any criminal offense resulting in physical injury or death of one family or household member by another who is or was residing in the same single dwelling unit" (Florida Statutes § 741.28(1) (2001)).

Florida law provides for detainment of youths charged with domestic violence offenses as follows:

"A child who is charged with committing an offense of domestic violence as defined in s. 741.28(1) and who does not meet detention criteria may be held in secure detention if the court makes specific written findings that:

- a. Respite care for the child is not available; and
- b. It is necessary to place the child in secure detention in order to protect the victim from injury."

(Florida Statutes § 985.213(2)(b)(3) (2001)).

Juvenile probation officers in Florida are required to administer a Detention Risk Assessment Instrument (DRAI) to each youth taken into custody to determine the relative risk the youth poses and the necessity for detention. Based upon the calculated DRAI score, the probation officer may place the youth into secure detention, nonsecure detention, or home detention care. A total risk assessment score is calculated for each youth and used in determining the appropriate placement decision. Release is recommended for youths scoring between zero and 6 points. Scores of seven to 11 points are considered appropriate for non-secure or home detention placement, while youth scoring 12 points or higher are considered a potential threat to public safety and are generally placed in secure detention.

## **Data and Methodology**

Florida's highly centralized juvenile justice system offers the opportunity to conduct a systematic, large-scale investigation into the characteristics of juvenile domestic violence cases. However, similar to other states, official data maintained in Florida's Juvenile Justice Information System (JJIS) does not provide any mechanism for distinguishing whether a particular offense involves a domestic violence altercation. Given the 1994 legislative changes and statutory authority noted above, one of the admission criterion on

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<sup>1</sup> Youths charged with committing a domestic violence offense as indicated on their DRAI are collectively referred to here as domestic violence offenders. This designation is used for ease of description and should not imply that the youth is definitively considered to have committed a domestic violence infraction.

the DRAI, is whether the youth is charged with committing an offense of domestic violence. As such, the current study relies on the DRAI to determine whether youths' offenses involve domestic violence.

The study includes quantitative analyses of secondary official juvenile justice data, as well as further qualitative analysis of the interviews with girls incarcerated in Florida's juvenile justice system. The quantitative analyses permit the development of a comprehensive profile of female juvenile domestic violence offenders and allow for an examination of gender differences in violent offending involving domestic altercations. The qualitative examination is relied upon to reveal the "stories" underlying the arrests and referrals for domestic violence-related offenses.

The research design incorporates three major sources of data. The first source is all completed DRAI forms administered between January 2001 and February 2002. The DRAI allows for the identification of domestic and non-domestic violence offenders and the primary data set is therefore drawn from this source. In addition to whether the youth's referral involved domestic violence, five other data elements are also extracted from these forms: history of sexual/physical abuse, history of neglect, total DRAI risk points, detention placement decision, and whether the only criteria met for detention was domestic violence involvement. A DRAI is completed on each discrete day that a youth is arrested or "referred" to the juvenile justice system. One referral, and therefore one DRAI, may correspond with multiple charges that occur on a single day. In addition, a youth may be included in the dataset more than once as a result of having been referred more than once during the calendar year. A total of 20,118 completed DRAIs were generated in the study time frame and all are included here in the current analyses.

The second data source includes placement and referral histories contained in JJIS. The 20,118 referrals identified through the DRAI forms are matched back to these databases in order to develop offense and placement history profiles. These profiles are analyzed descriptively and comparative analyses are conducted to identify significant gender differences in offense histories and pathways to domestic violence offending. Comparing data from the DRAI forms to the offense and placement history databases permits an estimate of the proportion of violent charges which involve domestic disputes. The research also includes a comparison of male and female domestic violence offenders relative to the correlates of successful community reintegration. The following variables are drawn from the JJIS database and included in the analyses:

- Age: in years
- Race: other, black, white
- Sex: male, female
- Most serious current offense: specific offense descriptions are provided as well as a variable categorized into: violent felony, property felony, other felony,

misdemeanor assault and/or battery, other misdemeanor, violation of probation, and pick-up order/court order<sup>2</sup>

- Whether any current charges are for violent offenses: yes/no
- Whether any current charges are for aggravated assault and/or battery: yes/no
- Whether any current charges are for misdemeanor assault and/or battery: yes/no
- Number of prior juvenile adjudications
- Most serious prior adjudications: both specific descriptions as well as categorized as outlined above
- Whether youth was re-adjudicated within 16 months of current referral: yes/no
- Whether re-adjudication offense was violent: yes/no

The final source of data is 68 in-depth interviews with girls incarcerated in moderate-risk and high-risk residential commitment programs in Florida during the spring of 1998. The interviews are re-analyzed to focus on the situational contexts of the girls' violent offending and domestic altercations. Issues addressed include: the relation of victims to the girls; whether any history of violence and if so, with whom; substance abuse; sexual activity; familial criminality and substance abuse; prior sexual or physical abuse; self-harming behavior; running away; and home environment.

## Results

The majority of the 20,118 juvenile referrals examined for the study involved white, male offenders who were 15 years of age at the time the DRAI was completed (see Table 1). Approximately one-third of the sample was classified as a domestic violence offender, 16% had either been sexually or physically abused in the past, while 11% were victims of neglect. Nearly three-quarters of the youths included in the analyses were ultimately placed in secure detention and 19% of these youths were detained solely on the basis of meeting the admission criteria of being charged with committing a domestic violence offense. An average of 5.83 points total was scored on the DRAI forms, equating to a detention recommendation of release.<sup>3</sup>

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 presents basic demographic characteristics of domestic and non-domestic violence offenders. Youths charged with a domestic violence-related offense tend to be slightly younger than those charged with other delinquency offenses (average age at referral of 14.9 years and 15.3 years, respectively). While whites comprise roughly 51% of all youths referred for non-domestic violence offenses, they represent nearly 70% of the youths charged with offenses involving domestic altercations. Females typically

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<sup>2</sup> Violent felony includes murder, attempted murder, rape, kidnapping, other felony sex offenses, armed robbery, aggravated assault and/or battery, other robbery, and weapon or firearm offenses. Property felony includes arson, burglary, auto theft, grand larceny, forgery, felony vandalism, and stolen property. Other felony includes felony drug law violations, escape from a juvenile justice facility, obstruction of justice, and miscellaneous felony violations.

<sup>3</sup> Note however, that regardless of total DRAI points youths may be automatically placed in detention for various reasons including being charged with a domestic violence offense or weapons violation.

account for between 20 and 25% of the total delinquency population in Florida, and as such, it is not surprising to find that 23% of non-domestic violence juvenile referrals involved girls. Notably, the gender ratio changes appreciably though for those classified as domestic violence offenders (1.44 to 1 male/female ratio).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

### **Current Offense**

Non-domestic violence offenders were primarily charged with property offenses, commonly their most serious referral was for burglary. Domestic violence offenders were overwhelmingly referred for either aggravated assault/battery or misdemeanor assault (94% of total) (see Figure 1). A similar pattern is found for both male and female offenders, though female non-domestic violence offenders were most likely to be referred for petit larceny.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The current research sought to determine what proportion of youths referred for violent offenses are charged with committing acts of violence against family or household members. At first glance, as indicated in Table 3, it would appear that regardless of whether the current offense is for a violent crime, roughly a third of all referrals involve a domestic violence dispute. Given that the violent crime category used here includes offenses that often do not involve such disputes (e.g., robbery, obstruction of justice, and rape), aggravated assault and battery offenses were examined separately. Youths referred for aggravated assault (43%) were significantly more likely to be classified as domestic violence offenders than those referred for other crimes (32%). When one looks at the offense of misdemeanor assault and/or battery, the differences are striking. More than 80% of these youthful offenders targeted victims within their family or household.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Returning to the initial research question of the study, it would appear that almost half of all aggravated assault referrals involve some form of a domestic altercation between the youth and a member of his/her household, and more than three-quarters of all simple assault cases involve domestic violence. While the latter finding appears constant regardless of gender (see Table 4), this is not the case for violent offenses and aggravated assault referrals. Female violent offenders are one and a half times more likely than their male counterparts to be charged with acts of violence against members of their family or persons residing in their homes. Similarly, while more than half of the females referred for aggravated assault were classified as domestic violence offenders, only 37% of males charged with this offense were considered to have victimized a family or household member.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

## **Juvenile Record**

Youths charged with a domestic-violence related offense have fewer prior adjudications than non-domestic violence offenders. Nearly half of the domestic violence offenders had no prior delinquency adjudications, while 29% of the non-domestic violence offenders had five or more prior adjudications. Similar trends are exhibited by both male and female juvenile offenders, with females being less likely overall to have extensive prior juvenile records. Differences between domestic violence and non-domestic violence offenders were actually more pronounced among delinquent boys. Males not charged with domestic violence were two and half times as likely to be chronic offenders (i.e., five or more prior adjudications), as male domestic violence offenders.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

In general, female domestic violence offenders had less serious prior delinquency records than their male counterparts (see Figure 3). Of the female domestic violence offenders with at least one prior adjudication (43%), most (65%) were found guilty of misdemeanor assault. A greater percentage of the males had previously been adjudicated for a violent felony than had the female domestic violence offenders. Among females whose most serious prior adjudication involved a violent felony, almost all (90%) had been convicted of aggravated assault and/or battery.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

## **History of Abuse or Neglect**

One of the most consistent themes in the research literature is the documented prevalence of victimization among girls in the juvenile justice system. Few have examined whether youths charged with domestic violence are themselves victims of abuse or neglect, and whether the prevalence of abuse differs markedly for males and females charged with perpetrating an act of domestic violence. In the current analysis, most youths, regardless of involvement in domestic violence and regardless of gender, had no record of prior sexual and/or physical abuse or neglect (See Table 5). This is not entirely surprising given that the data are official records, which have long been criticized as a poor indicator of the true *extent* of victimization. It is however hoped that the data provide insight into the nature of prior abuse and neglect relative to gender and domestic

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

violence. Consistent with prior research, a significantly greater proportion of the delinquent girls than boys in the study were assessed as having been sexually or physically abused in the past. Roughly similar percentages of males and females had a history of neglect. Domestic violence offenders appear only slightly more likely to have a documented abuse record, while the percentage of youths neglected is somewhat larger for non-domestic violence offenders. When the relationship between prior victimization and gender is broken down by domestic violence (see Table 6), the effects of gender are reduced slightly.

Holding race constant, a larger proportion of the female domestic violence offenders than male offenders had been sexually and/or physically abused. Black female juveniles charged with acts of domestic violence exhibited higher rates of abuse than white females. The percentage of black female domestic violence offenders who were neglected was somewhat higher than that of their male counterparts. No gender differences in neglect histories were found among white domestic violence offenders.

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

### **Detention Decision**

Recent statutory changes in Florida permit juvenile probation officers to detain youths charged with delinquent acts solely on the basis of whether the referred offense purportedly involved an act of domestic violence. It is not known whether this change has had a differential effect on delinquent girls, that is, whether they are more likely to be detained as a result of the law. Official statistics exhibited significant increases in the numbers of youth charged with misdemeanor assault and battery following the changes in the law (DJJ, 1995). Such increases did not mirror any similar changes nationally, nor were there any comparable rises in other felony or misdemeanor cases the year following the implementation of the law.

Table 7 presents the percentage of males and females charged with domestic violence within the detention placement categories of release, non-secure detention and secure detention. Regardless of the detention decision, girls were more likely to have been charged with acts of violence against family or household members. Among the girls placed in secure detention, more than half were accused of domestic violence, compared to less than one third of the males in secure detention.

INSERT TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

Female juvenile offenders placed in non-secure and secure detention were also correspondingly more likely than males to be detained solely on the basis of having been charged with an act of domestic violence (see Figure 4). Roughly 42% of the girls confined in secure detention did not meet any other criteria for placement beyond their violence against a member of their family or household.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Recognizing that this bivariate relationship between gender and detention may be a spurious one, multivariate analyses were employed with similar results. Female juveniles were significantly more likely than males to be detained solely on the basis of a domestic violence charge, holding socio-demographic and offense-related variables constant.<sup>4</sup> The analyses also revealed that white offenders charged with a violent offense, younger youths, those with a history of abuse, and those with more extensive delinquency records including violent offending, were most likely to be detained on their current offense for no other reason than their being charged with an act of violence against a family or household member.

**Subsequent Delinquent Offending**

Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine the nature and extent of youths' re-offending within 16 months following their current offense.<sup>5</sup> A total of 3,832 (19%) youths were adjudicated for a subsequent delinquent offense. A little more than 8% (n=1,663) were referred or adjudicated for a violent felony or assault/battery within the 16-month timeframe. Youths charged with a domestic violence infraction for their current offense were no more likely than non-domestic violence offenders to be re-adjudicated or re-referred, either in general or for a violent offense. Notably, while males were overall more likely to be re-adjudicated than females, a slightly greater percentage of delinquent girls (11%) than boys (7%) were subsequently referred or adjudicated for a violent offense or assault/battery. Domestic violence offenders, regardless of gender, did not differ significantly from youths not charged with domestic violence in terms of re-referral, re-adjudication, or violent subsequent offending.

Multivariate analyses identifying the predictors of recidivism for the youths in the study sample are presented in Table 8. Being charged with domestic violence or an aggravated assault for their current offense impacts the likelihood that boys, but not girls, will be adjudicated for a subsequent crime. One or more prior adjudications, a prior violent felony adjudication, being placed in secure detention for the current offense, and having a history of abuse or neglect are all significant predictors of the likelihood that both male and female juvenile offenders in the study will be re-adjudicated. Additionally, the younger the youth, the more likely they are to receive a subsequent adjudication.

INSERT TABLE 9 ABOUT HERE

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<sup>4</sup> These variables included age, race, whether neglected, whether abused, number of prior adjudications, whether prior adjudications were all violent, and whether current offense was violent.

<sup>5</sup> These analyses are preliminary as it was not possible for the current study to calculate exact time to failure and in some instances youths had only been released and "on the streets" for a relatively short period of time. More sophisticated recidivism outcome measurement will be conducted a year from now, when all youths can be tracked for at least 12 months following release.

Female domestic violence offenders are no more likely than girls charged with other types of delinquent offenses to be re-adjudicated. The same cannot be said however for the likelihood to be referred or adjudicated for a violent offense or misdemeanor assault. Delinquent girls previously charged with a domestic violence offense were significantly more likely to return to the juvenile justice system for a violent offense or misdemeanor assault than were those girls who were not domestic violence offenders. In fact, the most significant predictor in the model of subsequent violent or assault offending was whether the youth was classified as a domestic violence offender on the DRAI.

### **Qualitative Analysis**

The current research was predicated upon an earlier qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with a random sample of delinquent girls committed to secure residential facilities in Florida. Preliminary analysis of the interviews revealed the prevalence of abuse, family dysfunction and violence in the lives of the girls. The interview data are revisited here in an effort to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the situational circumstances surrounding girls' violent offending and involvement in domestic violence disputes.

#### *Demographics*

The majority of girls interviewed were black, 15 years of age at the time of the interview, were committed for a violent felony or misdemeanor assault/battery offense, and were under the age of 13 at the time of their first referral. Twenty-eight percent of the girls had documented arrests for domestic violence-related offenses (see Table 8). In comparison to the girls with no history of arrests for domestic violence, a greater percentage of the domestic violence offenders were committed for a violent felony or misdemeanor assault/battery.

INSERT TABLE 9 ABOUT HERE

#### *Prior Record*

Nearly all of the domestic violence offenders (95%) were adjudicated for violent felonies or misdemeanor assault/battery prior to their current commitment. In comparison, only half of those with no domestic violence arrest histories had similar adjudications. Non-domestic violence offenders, however, had more serious delinquency records than girls with arrests for domestic violence. On average, girls with no history of domestic violence had eight prior adjudications with a corresponding seriousness score of 29.3 points. Domestic violence offenders in the sample had a mean of five prior adjudications and average seriousness score of 18 points.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A seriousness score was calculated for each youth comprised of the sum of all scores for prior adjudicated or /adjudication withheld charges. Values were assigned: 8 for violent felony, 5 for property felony, 2 for misdemeanor assault, & 1 for other offense not already listed.

Fifty-six percent of the girls interviewed admitted to carrying a weapon at some time. A much larger proportion of the girls without domestic violence histories reported carrying a weapon in comparison to the domestic violence offenders. A fifth of the girls interviewed admitted to carrying a gun. One girl describes stealing a .44 magnum:

*"I had a nine millimeter... I used to carry that all the time with me and everything. But I never -- I just -- I pulled it out on somebody one time because they were pissing me off and they were threatening me and everything. I wasn't really gonna shoot them, but I just pulled it out to scare them. And then I got a gun charge, a .44 magnum with a scope, from this other foster home. This house that we broke into, they charged us with the gun."*

### *Home Environment*

One of the most consistent findings from the interviews with committed girls was the prevalence of traumatic experiences in their lives. Trauma was characterized as sexual abuse, physical abuse, witnessing domestic violence in the household, family death or community violence. Ninety-one percent of all the girls interviewed had experienced trauma in their lives. One hundred percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence had experienced trauma compared to 88% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories.

Most of the girls reported being exposed to violence in their home. Eighty-four percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence reported that there was violence in their home compared to 57% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories.

One girl described routine domestic violence events at her home:

*"I had to call the police on my dad one time because he was hitting my mom real bad...He had cut her on the throat and everything and so I went and called the police. And I seen a lot of that.....He used to choke [my mom] and stuff...He choked my cat because I wouldn't tell him where she was...we used to have marks all over us from where he used to beat us."*

For a quarter of the girls interviewed the case or commitment manager indicated that the girl's family situation was responsible for her incarceration. The commitment manager indicated this for 32% of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence compared to 22% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. In many cases, the juvenile justice professionals described highly disrupted families and one added:

*"She should be jerked out of her family never to return. This is a criminal, non-functioning family."*

Combining all sources of information from interviews with the girls, juvenile probation officers, case and commitment managers and case file review, 79% of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence had an indication of **sexual abuse** compared to 57% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. In all cases the perpetrator was male or multiple males. The perpetrators ranged from related members (father, step-father grand-father, brother, uncle, cousin) to family acquaintances to unrelated stranger and gang rapes. When one girl told her mother that her father had been sexually abusing her, the mother accused her of lying and the girl said:

*"... well -- right then and there, that's when I didn't care about anything. I said, well, you know what, if he's going to touch me; he's going to touch me. If he's going to rape me; he's going to rape me. Because she's not going to believe me, so it makes me feel ain't nobody going to believe me. But I said that if he touches my sister, I'm going to end up -- I'm going to end up killing him. And I was serious when I said that."*

The following is one juvenile probation officer's description of a girl's abuse history and mental health problems:

*"She has been sexually abused in two foster homes, by three or four uncles, and five stepfathers. She was sexually abused at a young age...at least six years of age. She has been diagnosed as borderline personality, ADHD, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and seizure disorder."*

Thirty seven percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence reported they had been raped by someone outside the family compared to 29% of the girls without domestic violence histories. One girl remorsefully said:

*"I looked at a child in a way a molester might look at a child...I'm like, oh my God, please take this away...That's when I wanted to kill myself...I don't have no love for myself. Because the person [who molested me] took everything from me. I don't care if I was to live or die."*

Combining all sources of information from interviews with the girls, juvenile probation officers, case and commitment managers and case file review, the majority (74%) of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence had an indication of **physical abuse** compared to 67% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. One girl said:

*"They whipped me, and -- and sometimes they'll punch me in the face, or just get some kind of board or switch and hit me across the back...or a belt buckle..."*

Eighty-two percent of all of the girls had an indication of some form of **physical or sexual abuse**. For nearly all of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence (95%) there was an indication of physical or sexual abuse compared to 78% of

the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. The girls' father or a sibling was more often the abuser of girls with a history of domestic violence arrests than non-domestic violence offenders.

Forty-two percent of all of the girls interviewed described their neighborhood as violent, dangerous, bad or said that they were frightened to live there. Non-domestic violence offenders had a slightly higher percentage indicate their neighborhood was violent or dangerous than did the domestic violence offenders. In talking about her fear of the neighborhood, one girl said:

*"It's like wherever I walk I'm scared, because I'm scared I'm going to get shot, or something. And I don't want to live the rest of my life having to keep looking behind me to check if I'm going to get shot or stabbed..."*

A quarter of the girls interviewed said that they had a caregiver or immediate relative die:

*"...I never thought things would be so hard like this, where you gotta see people, your own people die in front of you... [the alcohol and marijuana] kept my mind off it. I wouldn't think about it after while."*

One girl said this about the man who shot her father:

*"Whenever he was shot, I was like, once I grow up, when I meet that man I'm gonna shoot him, I kept on saying that; and I still hadn't met him yet. I still want to know who did it."*

Eighty-four percent of the girls interviewed have now or have had a family member in jail or prison. Almost half of the girls' mothers had been arrested. Forty-six percent of the mothers had served time in jail or prison. Thirty nine percent of the girls interviewed had or have had a sibling in jail or prison. One girl's remarks illustrate the prevalence of criminal behavior among families:

*"...my mom got out of jail, a little while later my aunt went to jail...Before she got out my other aunt had done made it there for selling drugs, and my granddaddy, he just stay in jail for selling drugs...My dad, he's been to jail for selling drugs...that's what that man do for a living, sell drugs."*

Sixty percent of the girls said that their mom or dad used or abused drugs or abused alcohol. Notably, however, a greater proportion of the non-domestic violence offenders reported that either their mother or father abused drugs or alcohol.

*"...My dad was so drunk all the time.... I just really started doing bad. I hung out with a lot of boys...And I was just doing whatever I wanted to and my dad didn't know it, because he was so drunk.... I just started smoking a lot of marijuana and drinking a lot and just doing what I wanted to...I'd just get drunk all the time and I was always high."*

Sixty percent of the girls reported using drugs. Half of the girls interviewed reported drinking alcohol. Very little difference in the drug or alcohol use was noted between domestic and non-domestic violence offenders.

*“...my mom, she still don’t understand—she don’t understand why me and my sister like this right now. She still don’t understand...When my stepfather put a gun on us, then I started running away.” “...that’s my escape. I’ve run away from everything,, and drinking is a way to run away.”*

Thirty seven percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence admitted to selling drugs compared to 25% of the girls without domestic violence arrests histories.

Sixteen percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence reported that they had been in foster care compared to 29% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. Some of the girls said that the system should take a youth’s family problems into consideration, or stated that there was nothing DJJ could have done to help with problems at home.

*“If I had been taken out of my home...I feel that if my home life wouldn’t have been as abusive or nothing...I would have wanted to be home. I wouldn’t have to do things to stay away from home.”*

Two thirds (66%) of the girls interviewed reported that they had run away. Forty-seven percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence reported running away compared to 74% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. These disparate percentages may be due to youth who are prone to domestic violence staying in the household and fighting while youth who are not prone to domestic violence running when conflict arises in the household.

*“I learned a lot while I was [in a prior juvenile program]. And, you know, I no longer committed crimes or anything else. All I did was run away, I guess. Because I was just sick of the abuse so much that I couldn’t take it. I’d just had so much of it, just, I couldn’t handle it anymore.”*

### *Violent Behavior*

A common thread in all of these interviews was of the girls either being violent towards others or turning the violence in on themselves. In some instances girls did both. Nearly half of the girls interviewed were initially referred to the juvenile justice system for a violent felony or misdemeanor assault offense. A third of the girls interviewed have perpetrated violence on a law enforcement officer or a juvenile probation officer. The majority (82%) of the girls interviewed admitted to fighting in school. The mother or step-mother was the target of the girl’s aggression for 68% of the 19 girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence. Sixteen percent of these girls reported that

they had abused their father or step-father. The majority (84%) of these girls reported violence towards others in general.

While on an ankle monitor on home detention for aggravated assault, one girl went to boyfriend's house with a knife:

*"When I got there they was in the front yard. They didn't believe I was there. So they ran into the house, locked the door. I kicked the front door down and went in there and just started cutting them up. I was so mad. I don't even know what I do when I'm mad. I blackout."*

One girl who said that she loved stealing and being on the run from the police, said she carried a little blade as a weapon inside her mouth, "...cause when people got a lot of mouth, they deserve to get cut up."

When the girls turned the violence inward, it likely resulted in self-mutilation or suicide attempts. Sixty three percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence reported that they had injured themselves intentionally compared to 48% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. Twenty six percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence describe carving, self-mutilation, or burning themselves with cigarettes compared to 17% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. Forty eight percent of the girls interviewed reported that they have attempted or seriously threatened suicide. Fifty eight percent of the girls who had documented arrests for domestic violence reported that they have attempted suicide compared to 44% of the girls without domestic violence arrest histories. One girl describes a suicide attempt:

*"And I overdosed on pills and I got my stomach pumped. And then in '96, I think, I overdosed on a bunch of pills and everything else, and I cut my wrist. And that was the last time I tried to commit suicide because by the time they found me, I was all in the floor. I was laying in a puddle of blood, because I'd hit one of the main veins. And I guess I took so many pills and my heart wasn't beating and I wasn't breathing. So they had to do the heart thingy stuff on me. And Officer D. saved my life."*

Another describes multiple suicide attempts and self-mutilation:

*"I'd try to jump out of the car going 65 miles an hour, cut my wrists, take pills ... after I got raped. ... Baker Acted a lot of times to the mental wards and stuff."*

Another describes suicide attempts and self-mutilation:

*"I split my wrist twice and tried to get hit by a car once ... when that thing was happening with my step-dad. ...And I tried to burn myself with cigarettes."*

## Summary and Discussion

Very little research has been conducted on the nature of girls' domestic violence offending and recent increased involvement in violent offending in general. Whether such growth is indicative of substantive behavioral changes or variations in official juvenile justice responses to young women, is the subject of debate. The primary objective of the current study was to gain a better understanding of girls' violent offending through an examination of seven research questions.

The analyses revealed that nearly half of all violent felony referrals involving girls were domestic-violence related, compared to a quarter of the referrals involving boys. The overwhelming majority of youths charged with misdemeanor assault and/or battery were involved in altercations with a family member or individual residing within the home.

Domestic violence offenders are in general less serious offenders than those not involved in domestic disputes. Female domestic violence offenders in particular had the least prior delinquency involvement and when they had been previously adjudicated it was generally for simple assault.

Delinquent girls were more likely to be the victims of prior physical or sexual abuse than male offenders. Domestic violence offenders were somewhat more likely to have been abused than those not charged with an act of violence against a household resident. However, an examination of this relationship by gender reveals that a greater proportion of the female non-domestic violence offenders were abused or neglected in the past in comparison to the girls charged with domestic violence. In addition, a greater percentage of black female domestic violence offenders had been abused in comparison to white females charged with domestic violence. While these findings suggest general patterns in prior victimization among juvenile domestic violence offenders, the true extent of prior abuse is likely underestimated as a result of the necessity to rely upon official records for documentation.

A little more than one-third of the youths placed in secure detention following intake were classified as domestic violence offenders. For girls, more than half (55%) in secure detention had been charged with an offense against a family or household member. Girls were also significantly more likely than boys in the study to be placed in secure detention solely on the basis of being charged with a domestic violence offense.

Future analysis will explore in greater detail the extent to which violence in the home and prior violent offending are significant predictors of the likelihood to engage in future violence. Preliminary analyses suggest that being charged with domestic violence as well as a history of adjudications for simple assault, increase the odds that a female juvenile offender will be subsequently referred for a violent offense.

This study provides evidence that male and female juvenile offenders differ in their violent offending. Girls are more likely to be charged with acts of violence against family

or household members than are boys. Qualitative analyses of these domestic interactions also suggest that these girls may be just as much the victims of domestic violence as they are the perpetrators. The recent growth in girls' violent arrest rates may be a reflection of a rise in family violence or an increased willingness on the part of parents and guardians to involve law enforcement in family disputes involving girls. Correspondingly, recent changes in Florida's domestic violence laws appear to have had a differential effect on girls in that they are significantly more likely than boys to be detained solely as result of their involvement in familial disputes. Similar to the criminalization of girls' status offending consistently documented in research, the current findings call into question the gender-biased approach to dealing with girls perceived to be "acting out."

Future study should examine the legislative history of Florida's domestic violence laws and more closely explore gender differences among the domestic violence offenders committed to secure detention who do not otherwise meet detention risk criteria.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	S.D.	N
Sex (0=male/1=female)	0.29	0.45	20118
Race (0=other/1=black)	0.43	0.49	20100
Age	15.13	1.79	20117
Domestic Violence Offender (0=no/1=yes)	0.33	0.47	20118
Violent Offender (0=no/1=yes)	0.17	0.38	20118
Abuse (0=no/1=yes)	0.16	0.37	20118
Neglect (0=no/1=yes)	0.11	0.31	20118
Placed in Secure Detention (0=no/1=yes)	0.73	0.44	20118
Total DRAI Points	5.83	7.39	20117
Detained for Domestic Violence (0=no/1=yes)	0.19	0.40	20118

<sup>a</sup> Mean values for dichotomous variables correspond to the total percentage of youths within the indicator attribute (equal to 1).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Domestic Violence and Non-Domestic Violence Offenders

	Non-Domestic Violence Offender	Domestic Violence Offender	Phi
Age			0.104 ***
10 years and younger	1.4%	1.8%	
12 to 14 years of age	27.2%	34.6%	
15 to 16 years of age	42.8%	43.6%	
17 years and older	28.6%	19.9%	
Race			0.167 ***
Black	48.4%	30.9%	
White	50.9%	68.5%	
Other	0.7%	0.6%	
Sex			0.192 ***
Female	22.5%	41.0%	
Male	77.5%	59.0%	

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 3. Percent of Juvenile Current Offenses Involving Domestic Violence (Total N)

	Violent Offense?			Aggravated Assault?			Assault and Battery?		
	No	Yes	Phi	No	Yes	Phi	No	Yes	Phi
Domestic Violence-Related	32.9%	32.3%	-0.005	31.5%	42.8%	0.079***	6.8%	82.1%	0.763***
Total N	(5471)	(1134)		(5561)	(1044)		(895)	(5710)	

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 4. Percent Current Offenses Involving Domestic Violence by Gender (Total N)

	Violent Offender			Aggravated Assault Offender			Assault and Battery Offender		
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	Phi	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	Phi	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	Phi
Domestic Violence-Related	26.5%	48.3%	0.205***	37.3%	54.2%	0.160***	80.4%	84.5%	0.052***
Total N	(687)	(447)		(614)	(430)		(3349)	(2361)	

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 5. Prevalence of Physical/Sexual Abuse and Neglect Among Domestic Violence Offenders by Gender (Total N)

	All Offender Types		Phi	Non-Domestic Violence Offender	Domestic Violence Offender	Phi
	Males	Females				
Sexual/Physical Abuse			0.085 ***			0.025 ***
No	85.8%	78.8%		84.5%	82.5%	
Yes	14.2%	21.2%		15.5%	17.5%	
Neglect			0.008			-0.03 ***
No	89.1%	88.5%		88.4%	90.0%	
Yes	10.9%	11.5%		11.6%	10.0%	

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 6. Prevalence of Physical/Sexual Abuse and Neglect Among Domestic Violence Offenders by Gender (Total N)

	Domestic Violence Offenders		Phi
	Male	Female	
Abused			0.049**
No	84.0%	80.2%	
Yes	16.0%	19.8%	
Neglected			0.014
No	90.4%	89.5%	
Yes	9.6%	10.5%	
Black			
Abused	16.0%	21.8%	0.074**
Neglected	11.5%	13.6%	0.031
White			
Abused	16.0%	18.7%	0.035*
Neglected	8.9%	8.9%	0.001

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

**Table 7. Percent of Detention Placements Involving Domestic Violence-Related Offenses by Gender (Total N)**

	Released			Non-Secure Detention			Secure Detention		
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Phi</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Phi</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Phi</i>
Percent Domestic Violence-Related	29.7%	41.6%	0.121***	8.8%	23.4%	0.185***	31.6%	54.5%	0.210***
Total N	(722)	(590)		(171)	(121)		(2813)	(1839)	

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 8. Logistic Regression Predicting Re-Adjudication and Subsequent Violent Offense or Assault Among Male and Female Juvenile Offenders in

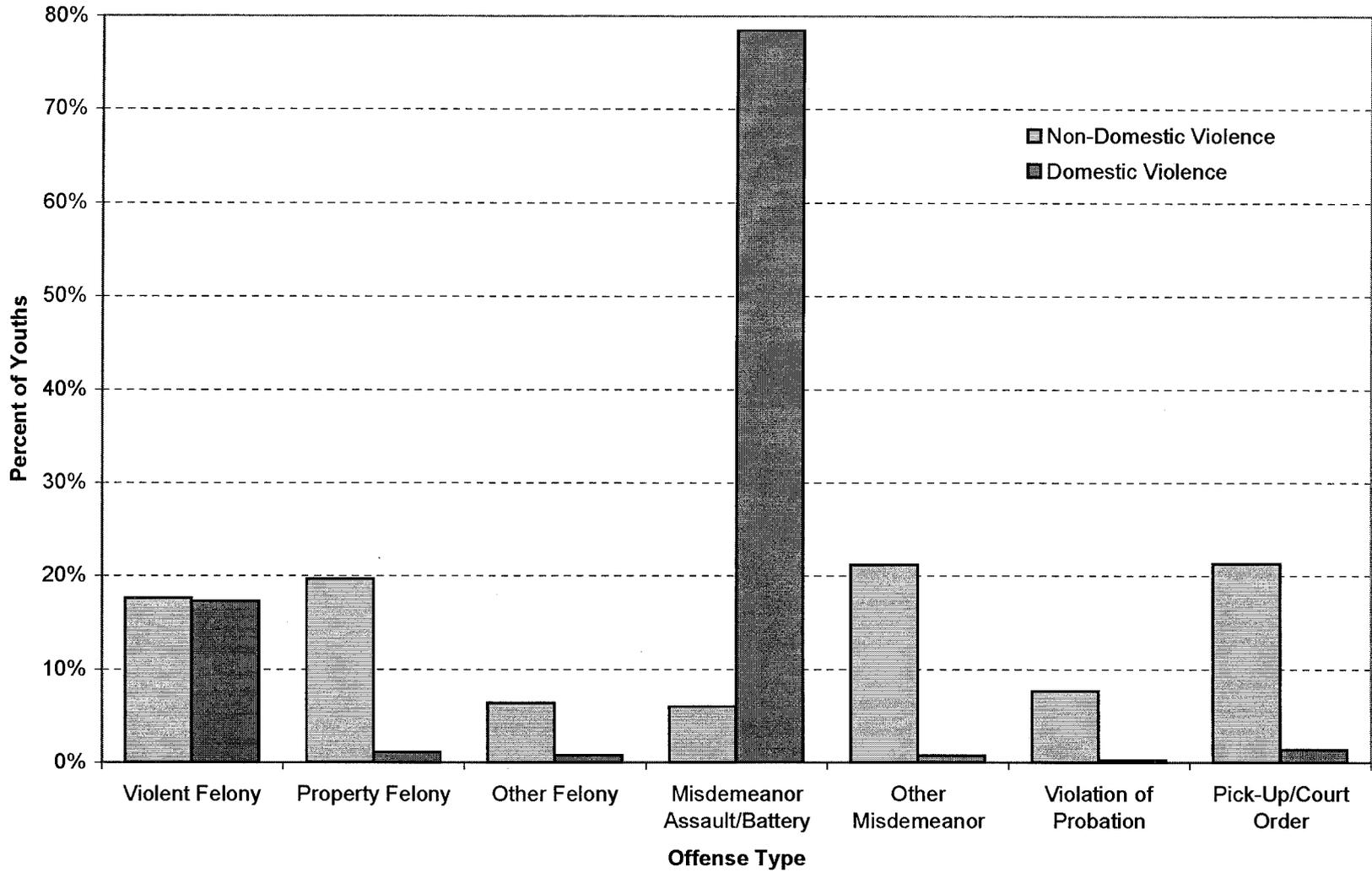
	Re-Adjudication				Subsequent Violent Offense or Assault			
	Males		Female		Males		Females	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Current Domestic Violence	0.1664 **	0.0557	-0.0401	0.0865	0.7487 ***	0.0778	0.6100 ***	0.1036
Current Violent Felony	-0.4407 ***	0.0638	-0.2457 *	0.1074	-0.1242	0.0901	-0.1350	0.1256
One or More Prior Adjudications	0.1984 ***	0.0136	0.2262 ***	0.0264	0.0114	0.0213	0.0403	0.0345
One or More Prior Assault/ Battery Adjudications	0.3613 ***	0.0523	0.5929 ***	0.0936	0.4984 ***	0.0806	0.5966 ***	0.1176
Placed in Secure Detention	-0.1290 *	0.0516	0.3282 ***	0.0912	-0.1137	0.0781	0.1268	0.1067
Neglected	0.3069 ***	0.0686	0.6555 ***	0.1058	0.1569	0.1024	0.1949	0.1340
Sexually/Physically Abused	0.3801 ***	0.0620	0.1971 *	0.0906	0.4919 ***	0.0883	0.2515 *	0.1100
Black	-0.0042	0.0460	-0.1301	0.0807	0.2344 ***	0.0700	0.2027 *	0.0955
Age	-0.1509 ***	0.0124	-0.2093 ***	0.0234	-0.1638 ***	0.0176	-0.2041 ***	0.0270
Constant	-0.0724	0.2081	0.4381	0.3775	-1.4179	0.294	-0.6403	0.4405
% Correct Predictions	79.85%		83.13%		92.59%		89.51%	
Chi-Square (df)	740.34(9)***		474.34(9)***		365.91(9)***		193.33(9)***	
Total N	13273		5293		13273		5293	

\* p < .05 \*\* p < .01 \*\*\* p < .001

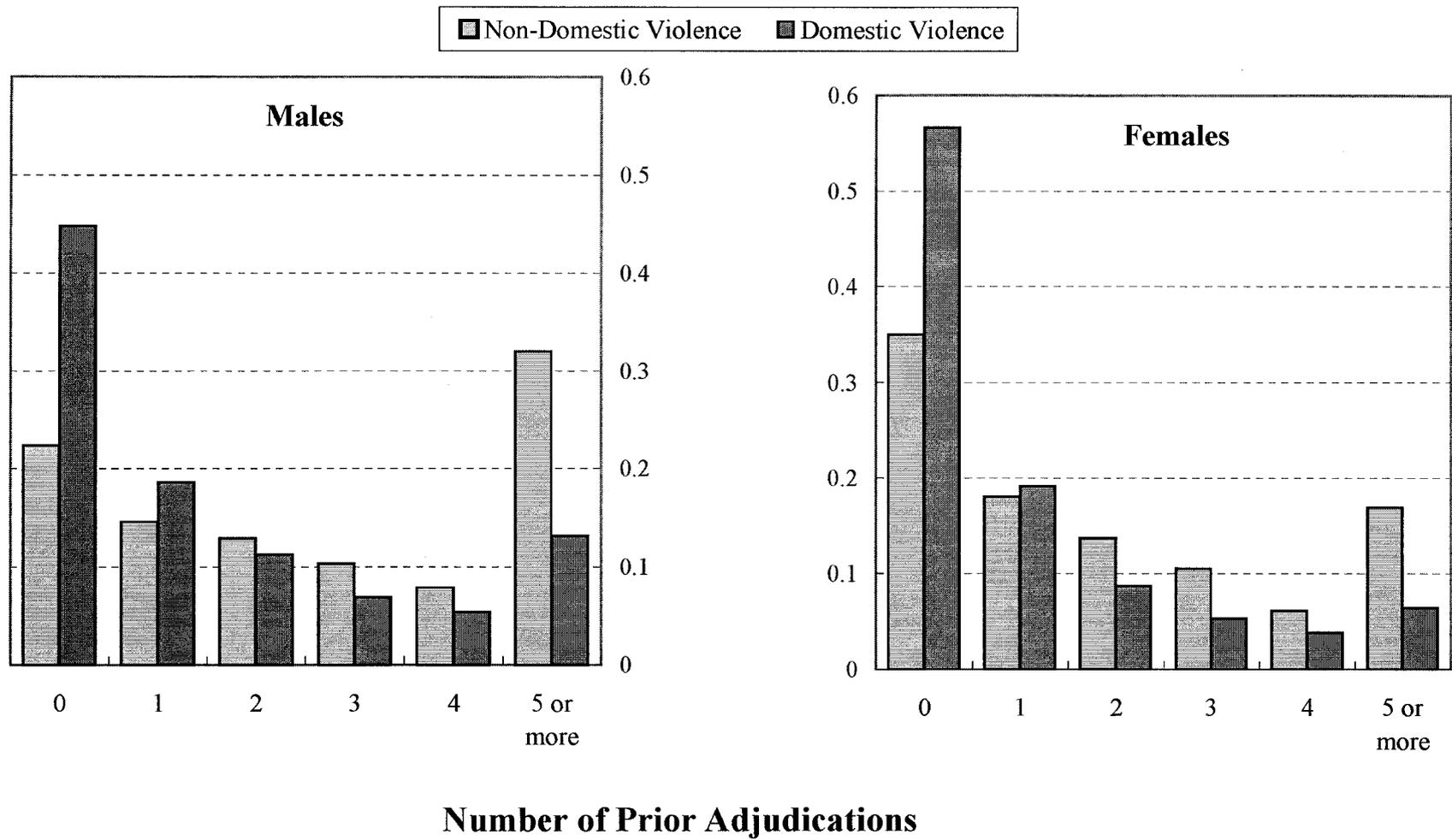
Youth Characteristics	Non-Domestic Violence	Domestic Violence	Total
<b>DEMOGRAPHICS</b>			
% of girls who are black	67%	58%	65%
(n)	49	19	68
Average age at interview	15.6	15.5	15.6
(n)	49	19	68
% who were committed to program for a violent offense	44%	68%	51%
(n)	48	19	67
% who were <=13 at age of first referral to DJJ	67%	74%	69%
(n)	49	19	68
Average age at first referral to DJJ	12.7	12.4	12.6
(n)	49	19	68
<b>PRIOR RECORD</b>			
% with prior violent felony or misd. assault/battery before placement	57%	95%	68%
(n)	49	19	68
% who admitted to ever carrying a weapon	63%	39%	56%
(n)	43	18	61
% who admitted to carrying a gun	21%	17%	20%
(n)	43	18	61
Average # of prior adjudicated charges	8.0	5.2	7.2
(n)	49	19	68
Average seriousness score	29.3	18.4	26.3
(n)	49	19	68
<b>HOME ENVIRONMENT</b>			
% who have experienced trauma	88%	100%	91%
(n)	49	19	68
% with violence in their homes	57%	84%	65%
(n)	46	19	65
% where commitment manager said family situation reason for incarceration	22%	32%	25%
(n)	49	19	68
% who were sexually abused	57%	79%	49%
(n)	49	19	68
% raped by someone outside family	29%	37%	31%
(n)	49	19	68
% who were physically abused	67%	74%	69%
(n)	49	19	68
% who were physically or sexually victimized	78%	95%	82%
(n)	49	19	68
% who lived in dangerous/violent neighborhood	43%	37%	42%
(n)	46	19	65
% in a gang or who associate with gangs	23%	35%	27%
(n)	47	17	64
% who have had a caregiver or immediate relative die	24%	26%	25%
(n)	49	19	68
% where father is abusive	16%	28%	20%
(n)	38	18	56
% where mother is abusive	18%	6%	14%
(n)	38	18	56
% where siblings are abusive	5%	11%	7%
(n)	38	18	56
% where an immediate family member has been in jail or prison	88%	74%	84%
(n)	48	19	67
% where mother has been arrested	49%	47%	49%
(n)	49	19	68

Youth Characteristics	Non-Domestic Violence	Domestic Violence	Total
% where mother has been in jail or prison	46%	47%	46%
(n)	48	19	67
% where father has been arrested	44%	26%	39%
(n)	48	19	67
% where father has been in jail or prison	40%	21%	34%
(n)	48	19	67
% where sibling has been in jail or prison	38%	42%	39%
(n)	48	19	67
% where mother or father uses or abuses drugs or abuses alcohol	71%	32%	60%
(n)	49	19	68
% of girls who use drugs	60%	58%	60%
(n)	48	19	67
% of girls who drink alcohol	52%	44%	51%
(n)	48	18	65
% of girls who have sold drugs	25%	37%	28%
(n)	48	19	67
% who have been in foster care	29%	16%	25%
(n)	49	19	68
% who said that they have run away	74%	47%	66%
(n)	43	19	62
<b>VIOLENCE</b>			
% where first offense was violent	41%	42%	41%
(n)	49	19	68
% where girl has perpetrated violence on LE or JPO	31%	33%	32%
(n)	48	18	66
% of girls who have fought in school	85%	74%	82%
(n)	46	19	65
% where violence is against mother/step-mother	NA	68%	68%
(n)	NA	19	19
% where violence is against father/step-father	NA	16%	16%
(n)	NA	19	19
% who have been violent towards others	84%	84%	84%
(n)	49	19	68
% who hurt themselves	48%	63%	52%
(n)	46	19	65
% who describe self-mutilation	17%	26%	20%
(n)	46	19	65
% who have threatened/attempted suicide	44%	58%	48%
(n)	45	19	64

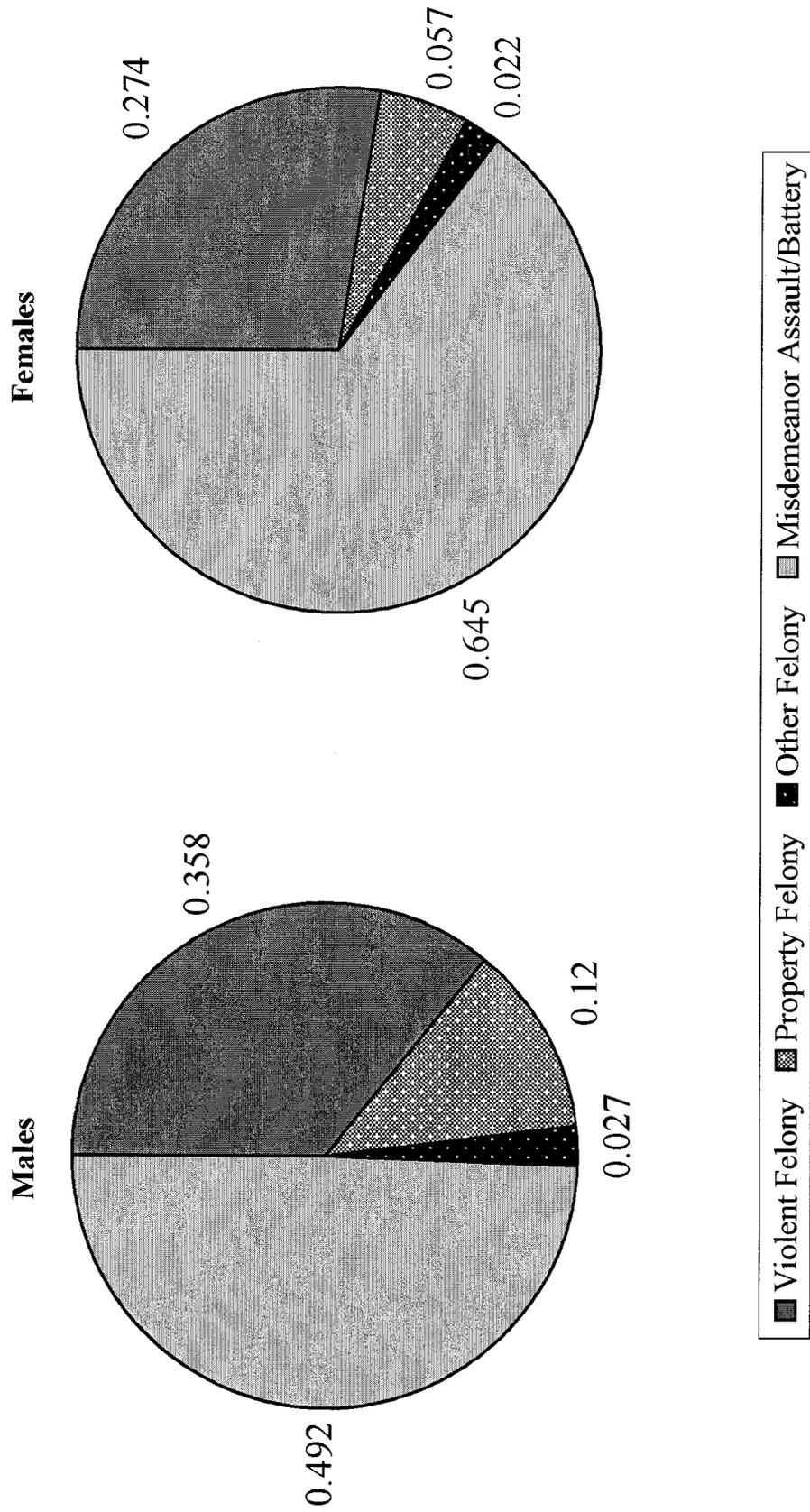
**Figure 1. Domestic Violence Involvement by Most Serious Current Referral**



**Figure 2. Prior Delinquency of Male and Female Domestic and Non-Domestic Violence Offenders**



**Figure 3. Most Serious Prior Adjudication of Male and Female Domestic Violence Offenders**



**Figure 4. Percent of Male and Female Youths Placed in Non-Secure and Secure Detention Held Only on Basis of Domestic Violence Charge**

