

# ADOLESCENT FEMALE AGGRESSION: PROPOSAL FOR A RESEARCH AGENDA

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In December of 1999, Statistics Canada (Savoie, 1999) reported that the arrest rate of female youth for interpersonal offences<sup>1</sup> – the only national-level proxy we have of violence committed by girls in Canada – has increased twice as fast (+127%) as for their male counterparts (+65%) between 1988 and 1998 while the same figures for adults increased only six percent. When such figures first emerged, observers were reluctant to classify them as a trend. As time passed, they are harder to dismiss as aberrant. Four hypotheses, none of which is mutually exclusive of the others, are commonly presented by way of explanation:

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<sup>1</sup> The Uniform Crime Reporting System of Statistics Canada includes these crimes in the category of “violent” offences: assaults, robbery, sexual offences, criminal harassment, extortion, attempted murder and homicide.

1. the dramatic nature of the increases is an artifact of the low base rate of female arrests for violence
2. the increases were triggered by zero tolerance policies for violence which have criminalized behaviour previously dealt without outside the court system
3. the increases are a reflection of changes in decision-making practices at key junctures in the criminal process including victim reporting and police founding/charging practices
4. Canadian adolescent women are engaging in violent behaviour more frequently than in the past.

It is not possible to point to empirical evidence to support or refute any of these assertions. Certainly, sensational media reports contribute to the view that a new violent girl is walking the streets of Canada. Reena Virk was only 14-years old when she died in 1997, beaten so severely that she drowned in shallow water. Seven girls, 14 to 16 years old, and one boy were ultimately convicted of various roles in her death. The image of a group of girls swarming and viciously beating another girl, extinguishing a cigarette on her face, was troubling to Canadians. While such a scenario is not uncommon among boys, witness the 1999 beating death of Matti Baranovski in Toronto, we have generally assume girls are immunized from such behaviour.

Attempts to isolate the precise causes of youth violence inevitably end up by concluding that a complex spectrum of variables is involved (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1993). In other words, youth violence is multi-determined by the interaction of individual factors (e.g., biology, temperament), family factors (e.g., parenting style, exposure to violence in the home), cultural factors such as norms that promote or discourage violence, and situational factors (e.g., access to firearms, gang membership, limited opportunities for pro-social activities). All these factors are affected by social forces such as economic inequalities, prejudices, media representations of violence, attitudes of tolerance toward violence and sex-role stereotyping. Where many of these factors cluster, as they often do in violent adolescents, they are entwined in a package that makes it difficult to untangle the unique contribution and weight of each.

The fact remains, however, that there are only two enduring and powerful correlates of anti-social behaviour including violence. They are **age** and **sex**. Violence is overwhelmingly the domain of young men. When we study the violence of male youths – and most studies do this – we miss the opportunity to see the complete picture. Why are girls less prone to violence than boys? Why does the violent behaviour of most violent youth decay over time as they age? In short, the study of youthful female violence is important in its own right but also helps address larger questions of the sources of violence in our society.

In any area of study, methodologies should progress in pace with the state of knowledge, from exploratory to descriptive to causal or relational. Causal research is ultimately most helpful in designing prevention and intervention programs. Research on woman abuse, as an example, started with the case study approach (to document that woman abuse existed), followed by larger scale descriptive studies (to document that the case studies are not isolated and to explicate the dynamics of the phenomenon), to population studies (to gauge incidence and prevalence) and ultimately to theory-testing studies, to determine if our causal postulations are on the right track. These data inform our design of public education strategies and batterer intervention programs (Cunningham *et al.*, 1998).

Recent reviews of studies on adolescent female aggression (Pepler and Craig, 1999; Leschied *et al.*, 2000) demonstrate that there is a small but interesting body of work. These and other studies of violent girls and women are shedding light on a much under-studied topic. Exploratory studies, in which it is wise to include research conducted on clinical and penal samples, have documented that girls can be physically violent. Qualitative studies such as that by Artz (1998) contribute greatly to our understanding of the tapestry of factors that come into play when girls are violent. As Bloom and Covington (1998: 6) note, “feminist theories suggest that focus on gender goes beyond simply adding another variable to the study of female crime.” Early efforts to study deviance and anti-social behaviour in women typically juxtaposed them to their male counterparts to examine the differences (e.g., Warren, 1981). Increasingly, females are studied in their own right, to uncover the unique aspects of their behaviour, the motivations and contexts in which those actions occur and how these factors vary among women.

As the media give prominent coverage to the Virk case and others, these research questions have emerged as salient yet unanswered:

- < what is the incidence and prevalence of adolescent female violence in Canada today?
- < are Canadian girls more physically aggressive and violent than in the past?
- < if female violence is on the increase, why is that so?
- < is female aggression caused by different mechanisms than male aggression?
- < what interventions are effective in preventing violence by girls?
- < what interventions are effective in reducing violence among aggressive girls?

This paper proposes ten research activities that collectively would further our understanding of the violent behaviour of young women that builds on the base of previous exploratory, clinical and

qualitative work.

### 1. Longitudinal General Population Studies

Questions about incidence and prevalence of female violence, and how they change over time, can be addressed by population surveys, a methodology employed to study many topics including women abuse, childhood sexual abuse and criminal victimization. In Canada, cross-sectional data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth indicate that parents and guardians report lower levels of aggression among girls than among boys age four to 11 (Tremblay *et al.*, 1996). In future years, this research program will examine these children longitudinally, follow them into adolescence and collect information on self-reported aggression. For example, among 12 and 13 year olds, 55% of boys and 27% of girls reported having been in a fight within the past 12 months (Statistics Canada, 1999).

In the United States, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in the United States annually interviews a panel sample of 9,000 nationally representative adolescents. Examining the 12-year olds only, 18% of males and 10% of females self-reported committing at least one assault (Puzzanchera, 2000). In most other categories of delinquency, the rates for boys and girls were similar to each other. Another exception was in the behaviour of carrying a handgun, reported to be true by 13% of boys and only 2% of girls. This study will also be able to document changes as the panel ages.

### 2. Decision-Making Studies to Explore Alternative Hypotheses for Increases in Violent Crime

Because so much emphasis is placed on police statistics as indication that Canadian girls are being more violent of late, it is necessary to examine the factors that construct these figures. It is axiomatic that crime statistics, while national, annual and standardized, are not a valid measure of criminal behaviour (Cunningham and Griffiths, 1997). This is because they are shaped by many factors: the majority of victims do not notify authorities, the police may not feel the incident violates a criminal law (called unfounding), and the police may chose to resolve the matter informally without a charge (e.g., refer the case to a diversion program or seek a peace bond). Figures from later in the process, such as conviction and sentencing, are even more distorted.

As noted above, there are four hypotheses for why the charging figures have risen, and only one of these is that the behaviour of Canadian girls has changed. Before we can contemplate the possibility that this is true, we must examine the other three hypotheses that may explain the increases. The base rate explanation for recent increases in female violence suggests that the small number of cases – 5,652 in 1998/99 – means that slight changes can translate into apparently dramatic and exaggerated increases. Indeed, the 127% increase quoted above has risen from 0.2% to 0.47% of the youthful population. In other words, in 1988 the *rate* of charging females for violent offences was 20.5

per 10,000 and it is now 47 per 10,000. The *number* of youths appearing before the youth courts remained constant during that time because the *rate* is being calculated on an increasingly smaller number of people in the 12 to 17 age category.

Alternatively, there could there be a double standard in how we see violent behaviour committed by girls that is played out in these charging statistics, reducing their utility as an indicator of girl violence. This double standard can work two ways. One view has it that female violence is more common than we think but it is not discussed, studied or addressed through criminal charges with the same frequency as male violence. Pearson (1997) suggests that female violence has been systematically ignored in favour of seeing females as victims who are violent in self-defence or under duress from a man. According to the chivalry hypothesis, the true incidence of female violence (and other crimes) is under-represented in official statistics because of biases in the reporting, arresting, charging, conviction and sentencing stages. Increases in official reports of female violence, in this view, reflects an erosion of the “chivalry” factors that some believe have traditionally resulted in disparate treatment of males and females at these key decision-making junctures. Equitable application of zero-tolerance policies in schools may also contribute to increases in the rate at which girls are charged for behaviours that previously were dealt with informally.

The double standard can also distort the charging rate for females through disparate decision making that inducts girls into the system for different reasons than boys. A discriminatory double standard is at work when girls are arrested, charged, detained, or convicted at greater rates or for more minor offences than are boys. Reitsma-Street (1993; 1999) is among those to argue that the behaviour of girls is judged to warrant charging in types of cases that are not seen as needing charges when perpetrated by boys. Incarcerating girls for administrative offences and generally making sentencing decisions based upon protecting girls rather than matching the penalty to the crime are two manifestations of gender bias (Corrado, Odgers and Cohen, 2000). In some jurisdictions, access to services by girls is not as extensive as for boys (Kempf-Leonard and Sample, 2000).

Investigating the differential treatment of boys and girls can be accomplished by examining police decision making after complaints are received. A precursor to such a study, which serves as an excellent example, is the work of Clark and Lewis (1977) who examined police decisions about complaints of what was then called rape. They examined all 117 rape complaints from one year in Toronto. Two thirds of these reports were classified as by police unfounded, a designation the researchers believed was questionable in 62 cases.

Where girls are concerned, research should examine the disposition of complaints and the extent to which cases are dealt with through unfounding, diversion with out charge, clearance otherwise without charge, and charging.

### 3. Comparison of the “Violence” of Boys and Girls Charged with Violent Offences

When girls are charged with violent offences, two thirds (67%) are charged with what used to be called simple or common assault (Savoie, 1999), the least serious level of assault and one that can encompass behaviours such as spitting at someone. The figure for boys is 46%. In other words, it could well be that the so-called violent crimes of boys and girls are qualitatively different. If this is the case, then using police statistics to examine male versus female changes in the rate of violence obscures important information about the nature of female violence. Closer examination of the violent offences with which youth are charged could shed some light on differential severity, contexts, and motives as well as explain any disparity in police decision making.

### 4. Pathway Research

It may well be the case that girls find themselves involved with violence for distinctly different reasons than do boys. Several researchers have examined the pathways that bring young women into conflict with the law. For example, Daly (1992) identified five pathways to crime including women who were abused as children and respond with anger and possibly violence and women who are arrested after defending themselves against the attacks of intimate partners. A review of the pathway research concluded that the variable consistently identified as the first step in the criminal behaviour of women is victimization (Acoca, 1999).

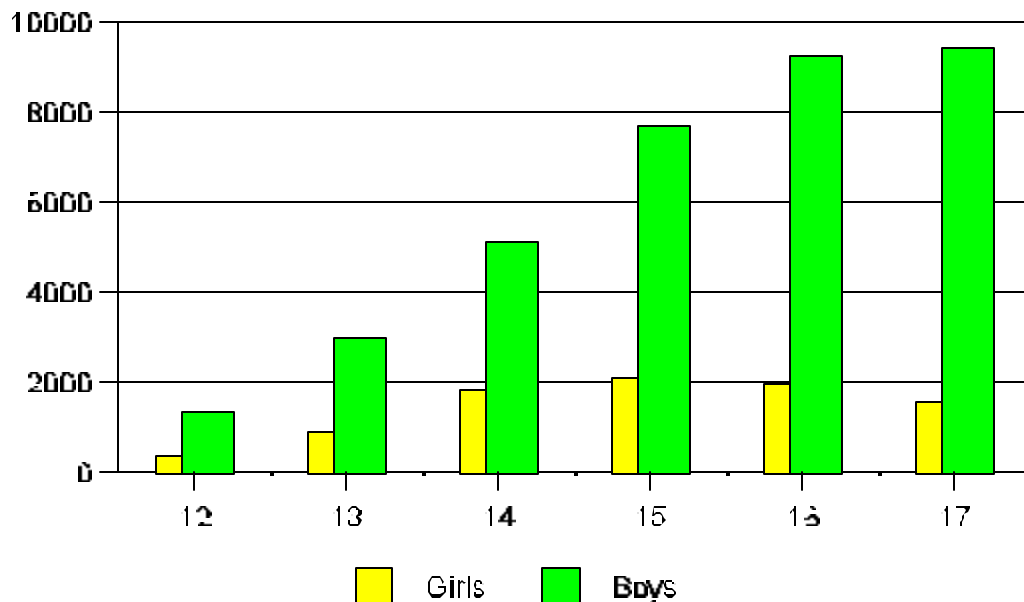
Several themes emerge from the pathway research (Cunningham and Leschied, 1998), most strongly that of *survival* where criminal behaviour is seen as economically motivated, either to sustain a life on the street, to assist family finances or to seek the acceptance of others through acquisition of material goods (Sommers, 1995). Aggressive behaviour may be reflections of defensive adaptations to surviving with abuse. Two other themes are *escape* (through substance abuse, running away, early home leaving, early school leaving, suicide attempts) and *stigma/self concept*, leaving young women seeking love and acceptance among exploitative or anti-social subcultures, by having babies, or living with serial partners who share their use of substances, abuse them, or both.

### 5. Study Desistance

Using criminal charges for violent offences as the indicator, offending girls are younger than males and their criminal behaviour peaks earlier. The average age of young women who are charged by the police is 15, true of statistics at both the national and provincial (Ontario) levels (Correctional Service Canada, 1998). This has been a stable pattern in Ontario throughout the 1990s. Girls charged with violent offences tend to be 14 or 15 (Savoie, 1999). The charging rate drops off for 16 year olds and again for 17 year olds (see Figure 1). In other words, if charging rates are a valid indicator, their patterns of criminal behaviour vary from boys in that they peak earlier and desist from crime sooner.

A small but intriguing body of research examines desistance: when, how and why people with histories of criminal behaviour stop. This is the inverse of the more typical approach that focuses on those most likely to continue with anti-social behaviour. This topic has been investigated using longitudinal study of offender populations (e.g., Kerner et al., 1997) and small samples of offenders (e.g., Arnold and Kay, 1999). Particular promising for the present purpose would be the use of a life history approach in small samples (e.g., Farrall and Bowling, 1999) or studying the autobiographies of reformed offenders (e.g., Maruna, 1997). The few studies which have examined females (e.g., Uggen and Kruttschnitt, 1998; Sommers et al., 1994) suggest that the process of desistance is a long and complex one that involves the interaction of many factors. A female-centred approach to desistance research would focus on factors such as relationships, child bearing, employment, education, stability of housing, and adequacy of income.

*Figure 1*  
Cases Heard by Youth Courts in Ontario (1994/95) by Sex



## 6. The Violence Begets Violence Hypothesis

It has been suggested by many observers that exposure to violence in one's childhood home is a powerful force that significantly raises the probability of violent perpetration or victimization. How this varies between boys and girls is still an open question, as is the role of various protective factors that may well mediate the relationship. However, criminal behaviour in young women is typically seen as

part of an overall coping strategy that frequently has its roots in childhood abuse or neglect (see Gilfus, 1992). Acoca (1998: 59) describes victimization as "one of the most universally shared attributes of women in prison." Indeed, 16 and 17-year old young offenders in Ontario report high rates of childhood abuse and, despite their young age, abuse in relationships (see Table 1).

While no direct causal link between victimization and criminal behaviour among women has yet been identified (Widom, 1989a; Widom & Ames, 1994; Rivera & Widom, 1990), the *correlation* between abuse/neglect and crime is high (Widom, 1989) and the mechanisms that contribute to criminal behaviour have been described as both cause and consequence of abuse. These include substance abuse, family problems, education/employment problems and mental health issues.

*Table 1*  
Self-report of Abuse Experiences, 84 Phase II Adolescent Women

ABUSE	Custody Sample (n=43)	Community Sample (n=41)	Total
Physically abused as child	60.5%	24.4%	42.8%
Physically abused as adult	44.2%	29.3%	36.9%
Sexually abused as child	48.8%	36.6%	42.9%
Sexually abused as adult	27.9%	19.5%	23.8%

*Source:* Shaw (1994: 13)

Approaches to studying this issue would include the long-term, prospective study of abused girls and those exposed to family violence. It would also be possible to isolate the risk and protective factors associated with later violence because not all abused children become violent adults.

## 7. Evaluate the Effectiveness of Gender-specific Programs

Earlier in this century, the predominant assumption was that delinquency in girls was a consequence of lapsed morality, a factor linked in some periods to low intellectual capacity. Anti-social behaviour in girls was thought to be particularly problematic because of their reproductive capacity and the near certainty, as it was thought, of passing along criminal propensities to the next generation, either genetically or through bad child rearing. Intervention efforts focused on tests for venereal disease, training in domestic skills, and efforts to control their sexual behaviour. The latter could include institutionalization and, in some jurisdictions, sterilization.

Today, offending girls are treated much the same as their male counterparts. Some have

suggested that the same principles of intervention that “work” for males should apply to women (Dowden & Andrews, 1999). However, the extension of general research findings to girls remains an open question because females constitute such a small proportion of the subjects in evaluation studies and meta-analyses (Koons, Burrow, Morash & Bynum, 1997). Many of the new and emerging approaches to programming for girls have grown out of an understanding of how girls are different from boys. While more basic research of a causal nature needs to be conducted, it appears that girls may well find their way to violent behaviour in significantly different ways than do boys and so treatment strategies should vary accordingly.

This realization was prompted a plethora of public discussion summed up by this question: “what about girls?” (Budnick & Shields-Fletcher, 1998). At this point, that question has not been answered with rigorous scientific studies that would unequivocally advance our understanding of what effective programs for females should look like, but there are many criticisms of the number, content, and variety of programs now available to females (Koons, Burrow, Morash & Bynum, 1997). Moreover, there is an emerging consensus on promising directions for programming derived from surveys of experts in the field and reviews of promising programs (e.g., Austin, Bloom & Donahue, 1992; Koons *et al.*, 1997; Morash, Bynum & Koons, 1998).

In the United States, a comprehensive review of best practices by the Office for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Greene, Peters & Associates, 1998) endorsed the need for girls-only, gender-specific programmes that aid transition into womanhood. Aspects of effective programming include addressing issues within the context of relationships (peers, family, school and community), increasing confidence, modelling and reinforcing positive messages about being female, challenging sex-role stereotyping, teaching girls they have many options in life, promoting health, fostering strengths and resiliency, and teaching skills in assertiveness, problem solving and relationships.

Gender-specific programming involves a concentrated effort to assist adolescent women in positive female development. Key aspects of gender-specific programming defined in the OJJDP review were:

- < taking into account the developmental needs of girls at adolescence, a critical stage for gender identity formation
- < nurturing and reinforcing “femaleness” as a positive identity with inherent strengths
- < providing girls with decision-making and life skills that will assist their development into womanhood
- < teaching positive relationship-building skills, given the importance that girls place on

relationships

- < empowering girls to use their voice, to speak for themselves, and to recognize that they have choices
- < recognizing the dangers and risks that girls face because of gender by acknowledging that the lives of girl offenders may have been affected by sexism, victimization and exploitation, poverty and racism.

Clearly, a move to gender-specific programming is advocated in the American literature. The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (1992) in the United States requires state governments seeking federal funding to have a plan for providing needed gender-specific services. Half of the states have done so already and the other half are in the process of doing so (Greene, Peters & Associates, 1998), although the pace of that progress is somewhat disappointing (Shelden, 1998). Some of the more common activities have been research, task forces and innovative pilot projects. One notable example is the Female Intervention Team in Baltimore, a unit of 13 probation officers that works only with young female probationers (Greene, Peters & Associates, 1998; Daniel, 1999). Implementation and evaluation of such programs, designed with an appreciation of the unique female pathways to aggression, would contribute to our understanding of how to intervene with violent girls.

#### 8. Examine the Validity of Current Risk-prediction Schemes for Female Aggression

In the criminal justice systems of some jurisdictions, risk predictions instruments are used to perform a variety of functions that include case planning, facility placement, security level, release timing and intensity of intervention (Griffiths and Cunningham, 2000). Such instruments can be general or offence specific, and may vary according to the task or be generic for all decisions.

However, such instruments, when designed and normed on males, may have less utility for girls when compared with instruments adapted specifically to girls (Funk, 1999). First, some items might need to be weighted differently. For example, criminal values and peer influence on criminal behaviour may well be of little importance for girl offenders (Liu & Kaplan, 1999). Second, some variables may have to be added. For example, history of attempted suicide was the strongest predictor of violent recidivism in one group of female inmates and history of self-injury was correlated with recidivism in another (see Blanchette, 1997). While depression has traditionally been dismissed as a treatment target because it was not known to be correlated with criminal behaviour, at least one large-scale American study suggests that this conclusion may not apply to girls (Obeidallah & Earls, 1999).

Indeed, a recent review of the literature (Cunningham *et al.*, 2000) determined that adolescent women share several risk markers with their male counterparts but that there are others than are unique

to females that are not generally considered in most instruments. It would appear that the accuracy of predictions of future criminal behaviour can be enhanced by modifications based on an understanding of how women are different from male offenders (Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). An Ontario study of the LSI-OR suggested that the cut-off scores used with men are not appropriate for women (Coulson *et al.*, 1996) and this instrument has been revised in its commercial form (the LSI-R) to eliminate risk categories altogether for women. The SIR Scale is no longer used by the Correctional Service of Canada while its applicability to populations other than Caucasian males (and some offender groups) is being reconsidered (Cormier, 1997). More generally, the low levels of explained variance of the LSI (Nussbaum, 1999) and other methodological problems (Griffiths and Cunningham, 2000) suggest that further research could improve the predictive validity for all groups.

Greene, Peters and Associates (1998) described two projects now underway, funded with the assistance of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD), to develop gender-specific assessment tools for use with girls in the juvenile justice system. The first is the Risk Assessment Instrument which objectively classifies a girl's risk of re-offending and can help decision makers and service providers target the resources best suited to the individual. The second instrument, the Strengths/Needs Assessment Instrument, helps service providers to plan and deliver gender-specific interventions. They are being piloted in the Cook County Juvenile Probation Department, where the Juvenile Probation Department now has a Female Offender Unit that will use these gender-specific assessment tools.

#### 9. Examine the Successes

In a related vein to the desistance research, studying the successful completers of a program, actually asking them why they managed to remain free of violent behaviour, is a strategy that is not often employed.

#### 10. Content Analysis of Media Reports of Girl Violence

Finally, it would be informative to investigate the extent to which media reports of girls violence are reflective, in frequency and content, of the cases known to authorities.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has advanced ten research activities to address several questions that have recently emerged as important: what is the incidence and prevalence of adolescent female violence in Canada today? ...are Canadian girls more aggressive and violent than in the past? ...if female violence is on the

increase, why is that so? ...is female aggression caused by different mechanisms than male aggression? ...what interventions are effective in preventing violence by girls? ...what interventions are effective in reducing violence among aggressive girls?

These are interesting questions for which there are no firm data that points to the answers. One national indicator – rate of charging of girls for interpersonal offences – suggests that violence among girls is on the increase. However, there are three rival plausible hypotheses to explain the changes: erosion of the chivalry double standard, increase of the discriminatory double standard and simple statistical artifact.

1. use longitudinal surveys of general population youth to determine normative levels of violence among youth
2. examine police decision making for disparity in how the aggression of boys and girls is responded to when charges are being contemplated
3. examine the different nature of assaults committed by boys and girls to determine the qualitative differences in behaviours which are categorized as “assault”
4. retroactively study samples of violent girls to examine, with each individual, the chain of life events (or pathways) that brought them to the context where they began to use violence
5. examine the factors associated with desistance from violent behaviour among the girls who were violent in early adolescence but who ceased using aggressive behaviour
6. investigate the connection between exposure to violence in the childhood home, experience of child abuse and later violence on a prospective sample of exposed and abused children
7. implement and evaluate gender-specific programs for girls
8. develop and test assessment and prediction instruments that are designed with an understanding of the correlates of female aggression
9. study the successful completers of intervention programs to determine why they were able to eliminate their aggressive behaviour
10. conduct content analysis of media reports to determine if the frequency and nature of reports of girl violence match the known cases

This program of research activities would add to our newly emerging understanding of how to prevent and intervene with violent behaviour by girls in Canada.

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