



# Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females  
Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force  
February 2006

## Trauma – Pathway to Delinquency

### “No Place to Hide” findings from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

Among the general population, 20% of girls report experiencing physical or sexual abuse.

Among the juvenile justice population, 92% of girls report experiencing emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

In situations of emotional and physical abuse, mothers were the most common perpetrators.

In situations of sexual abuse, which in addition to emotional abuse is experienced more frequently by girls than boys, the most common perpetrators were acquaintances (family friends, neighbors and dating relationships) and boyfriends.

The common correlates of these forms of trauma are:

*Poly-drug use*  
*Sex with multiple partners*  
*Gang membership*  
*Physical health problems*  
*Early pregnancy*

The potency of these correlates increased as the number of different incidents of abuse increased.<sup>1</sup>

The above uphold and/or augment the perennial correlates to trauma of substance abuse, depression and delinquency.

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) publication, “No Place to Hide”, reported that an astounding 92% of girls they studied in the juvenile justice system had experienced some form of emotional (88%), physical (81%) or sexual abuse (56%).<sup>1</sup> The tenet that trauma experienced by young women is a primary pathway into the juvenile justice system is long-standing and widely supported among professionals experienced at working with girls in the justice system as well as by prior and subsequent research.

In reaction to this type of trauma, girls frequently become self-destructive. Behaviors can include but are not limited to self-harm, suicide and depression. Depression, which is “highly correlated with girls’ experience of abuse”, includes symptoms that mirror behaviors commonly noted among delinquent girls: irritability, anger and oppositional behavior.<sup>1</sup> It is a short leap to see oppositional behavior and mistakenly attribute ill intentions.

It is crucial for programs and services for girls involved in or at-risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system to examine their services to determine if adequate response and even more importantly staff training time are given to the issue of trauma. Appropriate responses to trauma must move beyond addressing the issue as an educational topic or as an individual/group counseling issue. Whether focused on treating girls who have experienced abuse or not, if you work with girls, you work with survivors of abuse. It is essential for professionals to look at ALL of their procedures to ascertain whether daily activities and standards are inadvertently contributing to the retraumatization of girls who have been abused.

Begin this conversation among staff by asking them to imagine that they are a girl who has experienced abuse. Then ask them to answer these questions, “How would you feel coming into our program for the first time? Would you feel safe? What are the everyday things that might trigger distress because of your experiences? Does staff mistakenly assume you are being uncooperative or manipulative when in fact you are actually using coping skills you developed as a result of your abuse?” This is only one beginning to a process that is imperative if services are to truly meet the needs of girls.

*You will find other suggestions on the following page also.*

## Programs must address the abuse in girls' lives.

Component #5

excerpted from *Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources*,  
a publication of the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women.

"...many researchers suggest that the pervasiveness of abuse in the lives of adolescent girls could be the most significant underlying cause of high-risk behaviors that lead to delinquency. It is essential that juvenile justice personnel interpret girls' offenses within the gendered context of lives that often include extensive abuse histories. This shift in perspective can help professionals to reinterpret girls' offenses as complex survival strategies rather than simply as unacceptable social behaviors...it is important that program procedures, particularly those for crisis intervention, be informed by the assumption that adolescent girls have histories of physical and sexual abuse.

Other program practices to mitigate abuse retrauma include the following: Requiring female presence at all health care screenings; integrating mental health, substance abuse and victim services; training all staff to understand the effects of retraumatization; using gender and culturally specific criteria to determine variations in mood, perception, and behavior that could signal serious distress; providing information about protocols at the initial intake so that the adolescent girl knows what to expect; and asking about abuse directly and in a manner that is culturally and linguistically sensitive.

---

### References

<sup>1</sup> Acoca, L. & Dedel K. 1998. No Place to Hide. Oakland, CA. National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

---

February 2006 ~ Trauma - Pathway to Delinquency

## The Girl Connection

newsletter is provided as a service of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force.

For back issues of *The Girl Connection*, more information about the Gender-Specific Services Task Force, or if you are willing to receive future issues via e-mail to save mailing costs, please contact us:

**Kathy Nesteby, Challenge Grant Coordinator**  
**Iowa Commission on the Status of Women**  
**1-800-558-4427 or (515) 281-6915**  
**Kathy.Nesteby@iowa.gov**  
**[www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls](http://www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls)**

**PLEASE  
COPY  
AND  
DISTRIBUTE  
WIDELY**

---

Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force  
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women  
Lucas State Office Building  
Des Moines, IA 50319