Journal of Family Violence (2020) 35:509–518
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-019-00122-7

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Incarcerated Girls, Criminal Pathways and Multiple Forms of Abuse

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Published online: 13 December 2019
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Abstract

Researchers have long been concerned with the reasons that lead young people into a life of crime, yet most of this work has focused on the experiences of males and how they end up behind bars or eventually leave a life of crime. Mainstream criminological thought often lacks an inclusive understanding about the experiences that lead girls into the criminal justice system. With this study, the researchers seek to add to the understanding of how girls end up behind bars, specifically exploring the relationship between experiences of abuse and juvenile justice. Using two years of ethnographic research with incarcerated girls at a juvenile detention center in southern California, this article questions the abuse experiences of justice-involved girls and the connection between abuse and juvenile justice involvement for girls. Interviews with the 33 girls in the study were analyzed for disclosures of abuse and mistreatment, yielding the experiences of 14 different girls included in this article's analysis. Our findings demonstrate that prior to being incarcerated, participants experienced multiple forms of abuse, or polyvictimization, both inside and outside of the home. Further, the authors highlight how the experiences of girls contribute to their eventual incarceration. Participants had to negotiate mistreatment across various institutions and by multiple people, with little help from schools, the juvenile justice, or child welfare systems. As a whole this work provides valuable insight into the experiences of girls before they are incarcerated.

Keywords Girls · Life course · Incarceration · Qualitative research · Ethnography · Criminology · Prisons · Polyvictimization

Social scientists and criminologists have long been concerned with the reasons that lead young people into a life of crime. Research on the "criminal life course" has received ample attention over the last 30 years. Most of this work has focused on the experiences of men and how they end up behind bars or eventually leave a life of crime (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004). However, mainstream criminological thought often lacks an inclusive understanding about the experiences that lead girls into the criminal justice system. This article begins to address this paucity and adds to our understanding of how girls end up behind bars. Our findings demonstrate that multiple forms of abuse often lead to the eventual incarceration of girls. In doing so, the article provides insight about a group that is popularly imagined uni-dimensionally as "bad girls" who behave "badly" and whose actions are often divorced from larger discussions of abuse and mistreatment. This mistreatment is exacerbated by the fact that the young people in our study were minors, working class, Latina, and had few options to fight back against the abuse they experienced.

The current analysis examines the abuse experienced by justice-involved girls and explores the connection between abuse and juvenile justice involvement. This article describes the multiple forms of overlapping abuse girls experience before they are incarcerated. Our paper shows how the mistreatment these young people experienced inside and outside of their homes directly contributed to their incarceration. Additionally, our findings describe how the various institutions in the lives of these youth (like schools, families, and community centers) often failed at providing support and resources to keep them safe. Drawing on two years of ethnographic research with 33 incarcerated girls, 14 of which were selected into this study based on their interviews, at a juvenile detention center in southern California, this article answers the following questions: First, what are the forms of abuse girls in our study

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experience? Second, how are these young people experiencing abuse inside as well as outside of the home? Lastly, how does this abuse lead to their eventual incarceration?

This paper is structured as follows. First, the researchers discuss empirical and theoretical research related to the life course. This includes a brief description of the work that is available on the life course as it applies to girls. The paper also provides a general overview of girls' experiences in the juvenile justice system. As a whole, scholars who do research on girls and the life course identify abuse in the home as an overwhelming factor that leads girls to a life of crime (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004; Jones 2010; Simkins et al. 2004). The researchers build on this work by demonstrating the complex web of abuse the participants experienced and how it led to their arrest. Next, the researchers provide an overview of the research methods used for this paper, followed by a discussion of our findings. The paper concludes with a brief overview of existing work, our contributions, possible implications for future research, and policy implications.

Background

Sampson and Laub (1992, 1993) proposed a life course theory of deviance using data previously collected by Glueck and Glueck (1950) in their classic study *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency.* Life course theory was the first attempt to provide an explanation for participation and desistance from crime during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Sampson and Laub 1992, 1993). They advocate for understanding the link between social structural context and the mediating processes of informal social control while trying to flush out, "the criminological picture of age and crime" (Sampson and Laub 1993, p. 7). Their central argument is the role of social bonds to individuals in their family, school, and workplace (Sampson and Laub 1992, 1993; Thornberry 1997). They argue that delinquency at an early age produces weak social bonds to adults in young people's lives. In turn, these weak bonds contribute to young peoples' participation in delinquency. The authors explain adult crime in the same fashion. For example, Sampson and Laub (1993) argue that individuals who participate in adulthood crime for the first time do so because of these same weak social bonds to family and the workplace. Conversely, they argue that the increasing social bonds that come along with getting married, starting a family, and finding a job make adults more likely to end their participation in crime and delinquency. For young people, feeling strong bonds to family and school can contribute to desistance in crime despite structural factors, such as previous incarceration, living in poverty, attachment to deviant friends, or individual factors, including antisocial behavior or demonstrating aggressive childhood behavior (Sampson and Laub 1992, 1993; Thornberry 1997).

The body of work from life course theorists suggests that crime and delinquency are generated through a developmental process over the entire life span (Moffitt 1993; Sampson and Laub 1992, 1993, 2003). Further, individual factors interact with social factors which in turn affect the onset, persistence, and desistance of offending. The life course perspective places importance on these individual factors, such as personal backgrounds and histories, acknowledging that people are molded by personal decisions and experiences, within social and historical contexts at large (Yoshioka and Noguchi 2009). From infancy to adulthood, the life course model considers various factors and events as essential contributors to behaviors, changes in the individual, and decision-making over time (Hser et al. 2007; Thornberry 2005).

Currently, most research on the life courses focuses on the experiences of young men and boys (Belknap 2001; Giordano et al. 2002). Scholars, however, have identified several factors that influence girls' first contact with the criminal justice system. Among these factors, researchers overwhelmingly identify abuse in the home as a leading pathway to crime and future imprisonment (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004; Kakar et al. 2002; Schaffner 1998; Simkins et al. 2004; Winn 2010, 2011). In a qualitative investigation based in Philadelphia, Simkins et al. (2004) find that previous physical and psychological abuse in the home is directly connected to maladjustment in school, drug use, and subsequent incarceration. Similarly, Jones (2010) finds that girls who experience abuse in the home are more likely to be arrested when fighting back against this mistreatment or running away to escape abusive family. More often than boys, girls experience sexual abuse in their home (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004; Kakar et al. 2002; Simkins et al. 2004; Winn 2010; Winn 2011). Flores (2015) finds that one of the strongest predictors of girls ending up behind bars is experiencing physical, sexual, or psychological abuse at home. This type of maltreatment is linked to drug use and future victimization at the hands of strangers, acquaintances, or significant others and eventual incarceration (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004; Schaffner 1998; Winn 2011). While scholars are armed with this knowledge, researchers are still attempting to understand the multiple and overlapping forms of abuse girls experience before they are incarcerated.

Much of the female victimization research focuses on distinct, individual, or separate forms of victimization (Basile et al. 2007; Catalano 2012; Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). Yet, research has also demonstrated that being victimized once increases the likelihood of polyvictimization, or multiple experiences of victimization either simultaneously or sequentially (Cuevas et al. 2010; Delaney and Wells 2017; Finkelhor et al. 2011, 2009; McIntyre and Widom 2011). Employing life course perspective, polyvictimization becomes an essential component of understanding girls' risk of criminal justice system involvement, which this paper begins to address.

The Setting

The county where this detention center is located 40 miles outside of Los Angeles, California. The history of "El Valle" is similar to that of many Latino communities in southern California. When under the control of the Mexican government this community was used largely for agriculture and to raise cattle (Almaguer 2009; Glenn 2004). During this time, there was a large landed Mexican aristocracy that controlled the region (Almaguer 2009; Glenn 2004). After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, when large parts of the southwest came under the control of the U.S. government, this community continued to be an agricultural town (Almaguer 2009). After this transition, a large encroachment of white settlers began to systematically disenfranchise Latinos in order to take over these fertile lands. Similarly, white Americans began establishing their dominance, seized political power and isolated Latinos into unwanted and under-resourced parts of the city, often with the support of local authorities (Almaguer 2009; Glenn 2004). During the 1940s and again in the 1960s, a large population of Latinos and newly-arrived Mexicans revitalized the community and were able to recover some of their economic power (Almaguer 2009; Calavita 1992; Glenn 2004). However, in the era of neoliberal economic policies and the subsequent end of well-paid factory work, this city became a challenging place to live.

The drop in well-paid jobs, the increase in heroin and methamphetamine trafficking and addiction, the rise in mass policing and incarceration, and the peak in gang violence in southern California further hurt the community in the 1980s (Rios 2017). This, coupled with the continued de facto and *de jure* discrimination of Latinos in the city, completely devastated the city. These events left a ballooning gang and drug problem with no resources to address these issues along with an expanding California prison system that seemed to envelope whole families and neighborhoods. Today, in a county of 200,000 individuals, three-quarters of which are Latino, El Valle's residents are majority migrant workers, are working poor, or live below the poverty line. The people who were incarcerated at El Valle Juvenile detention center reflect the city's population and are almost entirely Latino/a.

This study is based on research conducted at El Valle Juvenile Detention Center, a newer facility built on 50 acres in the last twenty years which can hold upwards of 400 youths. Young people in this detention center are segregated by sex. Approximately 90% of the youth in this facility are boys, amounting to 40 girls housed in one unit of the facility daily. The girls' unit is then divided into "House One" and "House Two." House One holds girls who have not been adjudicated or who will be in the facility fewer than 30 days. House Two houses all other girls. Each cell in the facility can hold up to 4 people. The unit is connected to a recreational yard and central communal space called a "day room" where the girls eat and interact with each other. Youth who are incarcerated here often spend one year or less at this facility, which is common for county-controlled detention facilities.

Methodology

Over 24 months, the first author conducted ethnographic research at a juvenile detention center in southern California. Initially, the first author contacted several detention center officials. Eventually, the person in charge of providing education to the youth in this facility responded. This "principal" agreed to meet and the first author shared his personal experiences as an at-risk youth and high school dropout. After this meeting, the principal allowed the first author to volunteer in the school program and later introduced the researcher to several key criminal justice administrators. Initially, the first author volunteered in the educational program housed inside the detention center. During this time, the first author served as a tutor for girls in this detention center, eventually securing permission to conduct research at this site from the educational program and the criminal justice agency in charge of managing this facility. The first author conducted participant observation for approximately two years and gathered 500 pages of single-spaced notes before conducting interviews or collecting additional data.[1] He also coded all of the data for this paper.[2] This allowed him to restructure the initial research design to address the issues that appeared most in the field, notably the violence that exists at every stage of girls' lives and their negative experiences in the community. Once the first author reached the "saturation point" using field notes, he began conducting interviews. During the participant observation stage, the significance of girls' experiences with abuse became apparent.

After collecting this preliminary data, 44 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 33 different incarcerated girls were completed, with 14 individuals girls' interviews included in this analysis due to their reported experiences of abuse and mistreatment. To accomplish this, the first author began informing participants of his intention to conduct interviews at the facility. He took the names of girls that expressed an interest in being involved and allowed girls to join the study if they demonstrated interest at a later time. Before beginning interviews, participants were informed that the interview would be recorded, they could stop at any time with no consequence, and that they could contact a social worker in the facility if they had concerns about the study or wished to no longer participate. For participants who lived at home, a letter was sent home informing their parents about the possible interview and providing contact information for the first

[1] All of the interviews took place between 2010 and 2011.

[2] The second and third author helped analyze data and collected background information for the paper. All three authors contributed to writing and editing the manuscript as a whole. A small team of research assistants transcribed the data.

author should they wish to exclude their child from participating or ask questions, allowing a 2-week period in which to receive a response before proceeding with the interview. For youth who were in the foster care system, sending a letter "home" was not an option; instead, the consent of the youth was obtained in alignment with California's legal parameters. The University ethics board approved all research in this study, and the first author received consents/assents by the interviewees, as well as their parents and/or guardians, if applicable.

Almost all of the girls were Latina, mostly of Mexican American descent. Additionally, most of the youth in our study were poor or working class and lived in segregated Latino/a neighborhoods. Almost all of the girls have been incarcerated multiple times for non-violent drug-related offenses. The first author conducted all preliminary interviews inside of secure detention. He also conducted focus groups and individual follow-up interviews. Each formal interview lasted between one to three hours, with most lasting about an hour and a half, and were conducted inside an empty soundproof room that teachers, counselors, social workers, and probation officers use to meet with incarcerated youth. Fieldnotes and interviews were transcribed verbatim. *Dedoose,* a qualitative data analysis software package, was used to code these documents. The researchers paid special attention to how youth in these settings discussed their experiences at home, school, detention, and in the community. Our analysis included a thorough examination of "negative cases" or alternative explanations. When the researchers were confronted with a negative case, they addressed it in the text or incorporated it into the larger analysis. Looking for alternative explanations in this research ultimately strengthened our findings.[3]

During data collection, the first author constantly thought about his own privilege and power. As a middle class, educated man of color he was unquestionably in the position to take advantage of his research participants. As a researcher, he understood that he would eventually leave this site and benefit from the data collected, while the research participants remained incarcerated. To offset this imbalance, during the fieldwork process the first author attempted to provide participants with as many resources (particularly educational resources) as possible. The first author conducted guest lectures where he discussed his experiences and highlighted his current academic achievements. He also discussed how to gain access to academic resources and how to transfer from community college to four-year universities. Finally, he organized poetry, spoken word, and other creative writing workshops. During these workshops participants often discussed feeling empowered and asked how they could become professional poets and writers. The first author did his best to encourage girls to pursue higher education, as it had a transformative effect in his life.

However, the first author had to accept that this project, poetry workshops, and college presentations were not going to set these girls free or achieve his overarching goal: to end mass incarceration. The first author was also aware that his background as a working-class person of color, and former troubled youth, allowed him to connect with participants and build rapport. Due to the first author's experiences, he and his participants shared a lexicon common to marginalized Latina/os living in poor gang-entrenched communities. He was also aware that the girls looked up to him, because very few members in their community have attained advanced degrees. They often spoke to him about their family, court, and school problems. The researcher sat and listened, hoping this would help them work through their problems. He understood that because of his power as a man and a researcher, participants were more likely to agree to an interview or answer his many questions. Finally, during interviews he shared stories when participants disclosed experiences which reminded him of the multiple forms of oppression and abuse that he encountered as a youth. Building these connections ultimately helped participants feel comfortable enough to participate in an interview for this project.

Findings

The phrase "abuse" or a discussion of being mistreated appeared approximately 32 different times during the coding process. This phrase emerged in field notes on five occasions and in interviews 27 times. In total, 14 different girls mentioned being abused out of 33 included in the study. This paper only focuses on the participants that experienced abuse (see Table 1 for demographic information on included participants). The patterns of abuse the girls in our study described are almost identical with only slight variations. In other words, the experiences of the young people in our study were strikingly similar.

Participants described extensive experiences with abuse inside as well as outside of the home. Among these experiences, three clear patterns emerged. First, the researchers found that incarcerated youth simultaneously experience multiple forms of abuse. Second, participants suffer abuse from multiple people. Finally, findings demonstrate how abuse in the home directly lead to these young people's arrest and subsequent incarceration.

Multiple Forms of Abuse

One of the main findings demonstrates that incarcerated youth experience multiple types of abuse collectively, but perhaps more alarmingly, they experience multiple types of abuse individually and often simultaneously. Overall, participants

[3] This method of analyzing ethnographic data follows the process described in Emerson et al. (1995). See this text for an extensive discussion on the process of coding qualitative data.

Table 1 Participant demographic information

Name	Age	Race	SES	Violent offense	# of Previous Incarcerations	Age at First Incarcerated
Diana	17	Latina	Middle	Yes	6	14
Aracely	19	Latina	Low	No	19	13
Haley	18	White	Low	No	N/A	17
Ray	17	Latina	Low	No	N/A	14
Annabel	17	Latina	Low	Yes	19	13
Jackie	15	Latina	Low	No	4	14
Mary Jane	15	Latina	Low	Yes	2	15
Rasta	15	White	Low	No	6	13
Debby	14	Latina	Low	No	3	13
Mariana	16	Latina	Low	Yes	2	14
Juliana	18	Latina	Low	Yes	3	17
Brittany	15	White	Low	No	6	14
Feliz	17	Latina	Middle	No	5	16
Virginia	16	Latina	Low	Yes	1	13

disclosed abuses ranging from physical neglect, sexual abuse, and physical abuse in the form of hitting, to physical abuse so severe that the participant's life was in jeopardy. Participants were forced to live in abusive homes, to sleep on park benches, be shuffled from abusive house to abusive house, and even choose intimate relationships tainted by interpersonal violence and coercion to avoid returning to abusive parents. Additionally, participants reported a general sense of fear and intimidation being weaponized against them.

Moreover, the participants were subject to multiple forms of abuse, often experiencing verbal abuse along with physical abuse and/or sexual abuse, or polyvictimization (Delaney and Wells 2017). Annabel, 17-years-old, illustrated this when discussing some verbal abuse, with sexual undertones (related to sexual abuse reported in a different excerpt), and physical abuse from her father:

> …my father would look at me like "ewwh." Like, he would tell me like, "ewwh. You're a whore." You know just be very - call me names, like, "You're nasty. You're a nasty little girl." He would make sit in the room and he would take the door off the hinges sit there and watch me. …He would make me sit and wear my brother's clothes if my grandmother bought me a cute little shirt he would rip it. [inaudible] look like a whore. ...My father was very - he over did it a lot. He would hit me. One time I remembered he pushed [me] down the stairs 'cause I didn't wanna get my mom a cup of soda. So he pushed me down the stairs and he broke a pitcher thing on my head and my hair had - it had, like, a bald spot from when he hit my head into the wall.

Further, participants reported verbal, physical, and/or sexual abuses overlapping with instances of neglect. Our polyvictimization findings align with previous research indicating that not only does a single form of victimization increase the risk of polyvictimization for youth (Cuevas et al. 2010; Finkelhor et al. 2011, 2009; McIntyre and Widom 2011), but also that foster youth who experience childhood maltreatment are at an increased risk of polyvictimization (Delaney and Wells 2017; McIntyre and Widom 2011).

Among the participants, some experienced neglect due to the absence of parents – physically and in terms of care for and supervision of the participants. However, other forms of neglect were found as well, such as intentional denial of food, blocked access to education, and lack of clean and safe living conditions. In addition to experiencing physical abuse from her father, Juliana, 18-years-old, described other mistreatment she received at his hands:

> …he would let me starve. He would let me starve, like. He'd ground me, he'd ground me and then like I don't know he would let me starve and I wouldn't be able to get out of my room just and he wouldn't even let me go to school either, I think. I was grounded and I had to be in to my room. Like, I don't know like, I'd stay there. If he grounded me for like a whole week I'd stay there for like a week.

In these excerpts Annabel and Juliana describe experiencing multiple forms of abuse in their homes. Further, the youth in our study reported multiple forms of abuse at home so extensive that they put themselves at further risk to avoid their abusive families. For example, Debby, 14-years-old, described her relationship with her mom and one aspect of the abuse she experienced at home, stating:

> Me and my mom used to argue really, really bad and I used to be short, tiny, like this short, and my mom was bigger than me so she thought, you know, she could take advantage of that. [inaudible] I love my mom, my mom used to beat the f-lip out of me, like crap out of me.

Debby left home at age 12 and started living with an older man. Initially, living in this new place provided her peace and safety from her mother's abuse. However, as her relationship progressed it also became abusive. Debby's relationship with her boyfriend quickly became riddled with cheating, coercion in which he provided for her needs and wants in exchange for sex, and physical abuse. Yet, she remained in that relationship, stating, "I still didn't leave him porque [because] I was like trying to get away from my mom." While researchers have established the damaging effects of mistreatment (Simkins et al. 2004), experiencing multiple forms of abuse and mistreatment exacerbates the harm and increases the risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system (Giordano et al. 2002). Additionally, multiple scholars demonstrate how girls often escape abusive homes and living situations only endure further abuse once they leave (Flores et al. 2017; Flores 2015). Moreover, this finding complicates our understanding of the abuse girls experience before they become involved in the justice system.

Abuse from Multiple People

While researchers know the risks associated with abuse and multiplying effect of multiple forms of abuse (Jones 2010), another concern raised in our findings is the pervasiveness of abuse across a given individual's relationships. Multiple girls reported being abused by more than one person in their life. Some participants reported abuse from their mother or father; however, many reported abuses from a variety of combinations of mother or father, both parents, siblings, extended family members, and neighbors or friends of their family. This trend is especially concerning given the turbulence of participants' living conditions and location. Participants commonly described being left by abusive parents with other family members who were also abusive. However, some did not experience abuse just from those with whom they resided. Ray, 17-years-old, described the varied abuses she suffered perpetrated by multiple people:

> He [father] like molested me…and then I went to go live back with my mom…and she always used to go to my aunt's house… And they would drink and stuff and her neighbor used to do the same thing to me and another couple of kids in our neighborhood…and then umm… after that I just…I don't know…umm…and then it got worse…I went to go live in Fresno with my nina and my nino…my godparents…and they were alcoholics and they would just treat me like crap…and then I moved back…my mom started doing her own thing so no one was really home…we lost the place…that's when I started doing drugs.

Ray describes a very common theme among the participants. They often experienced abuse in the home at the hands of parents and family members. What is unique about the experiences of these participants is the fact that this type of mistreatment seemed to open the door for more abuse at the hands of other individuals. While abuse in the home is a well-established pathway to crime, scholars' understanding of the types and frequency of abuse is still being established. Ray's narrative and the stories of the participants demonstrate the complex web of abuse that this population often faces.

Several participants shared that a family member (often a parent) targeted them specifically for violent abuse. Two examples illustrate this point and offer the participants' interpretation of the situation. First, Annabel says:

> Like, my dad overdid it on me...he's never hit them. He never cussed them out. Nothing like that. I was the only one, like, he excluded from the family. And I was real close to my mom. Me and my mom were so close but she never did anything 'cause the abuse would turn to her if she said anything or spoke up. And I didn't - I was always told "You can't rat on your dad." So I never really said anything but I did have, like, a couple of, like - when I would go to school they would write it down. I've had social workers come to the house and my father would always "Oh, no. She got in a fight at school." Or something. So, that's the way it was with me and my father. It was horrible. …Like, it was really horrible and I couldn't take it no more. And I would always act out on how my father's treating me. He was good with my brothers. He loved my brothers. I guess it's because it was a guy thing.

Next, Virginia, 16-years-old, tells of her father:

> …like he was mean he was just evil, like umm he never really yelled at us, he…then that's when he started hitting me, and like I was the only person that he would hit. He wouldn't hit any of my sisters and he would tell me it was because umm I was the stronger one and I could handle it. But you know what I think of it as? Umm cus he would beat the shit out of our dog, like you know when a dog, an animal is about to die and they shit on themselves, he would beat it that bad. And I thought so since he would train the dog to do whatever he wanted to do, he would like train me to be that way.

In these accounts, Annabel and Virginia verbalize their internalized thoughts and the meaning they ascribe to the abuse they suffered, which they perceived as inequitable in comparison to how their siblings were treated.

In addition to experiencing abuse themselves, participants frequently witnessed intimate partner violence (IPV) and abuse of siblings at home. Feliz, 17-years-old, remembered one such time, describing:

> I was in the room getting ready and my sister was at cross country practice like at six in the morning, and my brother's getting ready, like we hear this scream, me and my brother, so we went to the kitchen, like we saw my mom on the ground like trying to get up and my dad with a knife and so I was like what going on? She's like call 911.

Most commonly, participants reported fathers abusing mothers, but occasionally violence and abuse by both parents, directed at one another, was reported. Oftentimes, the participants experienced indirect exposure or victimization (Mbilinyi et al. 2007) of their parents' IPV, by hearing their parents fighting and sometimes eventually seeing the actual abuse or its aftermath. This finding may offer insight to the various outcomes research has found of the effects of IPV exposure for children and its negative outcomes.

However, the concerns of exposing children to IPV extends to direct victimization as well, when the children, or in this case participants, become involved in the IPV by trying to intervene or being hit due to proximity (Calvete and Orue 2013; DeBoard-Lucas and Grych 2011; Edleson 1999). Debby illustrated this risk with one story of herself and her brothers. After hearing loud, concerning noises from their parents' bedroom and the children knocking on the door, Debby's father opened the door…

> …and we just saw my dad with a seat belt in his hand and my mom's face is all bruised up were all like [inaudible] "papi stop stop stop," and my dad was all, "what are you doing out of bed get your asses back in bed fuck you guys." Like he wasn't fully there. …[My big brother] he was 11 or 12 and he was like already tall and fat, yeah looking like a man. So he would stand in front of my dad like a bunch of times like, "papi don't do it papi don't do it!" …and I would be like, "don't do it pa don't do it!" And I hit my head against the closet and he's all get the fuck away from me. And I got scared it was the first time he was talking to me like that.

For the girls in our study, witnessing IPV against a parent, friend, or family member also resulted in experiencing abuse themselves.

Abuse and First Arrest

Participants also directly connected their experiences of abuse at home to their first contact with the criminal justice system. All 14 girls in this analysis reported experiencing abuse or attempting to avoid further harm as a key factor that contributed to their incarceration. While the details varied among participants, many centered on interactions with law enforcement and subsequent arrest due to avoiding an abusive home, fighting back during abuse from their parents, or reporting their abuse to officials. Aracely, 19, for example, described the first time she was taken to juvenile detention:

> ...I had went to school, 'cause um, I was scared of going back home. I didn't wanna go back home with my dad [because of abuse], and so when my probation came [to my house] I was like, oh I don't wanna go with my dad, like, I don't really wanna go with him and then they're like "we're gonna talk to your dad" and they came back, they came back into the room and they told me to get up and put my hands behind my back and that's when I got arrested.

In the above quote, Aracely describes choosing not to return home to avoid further abuse from her father. After going to school, she told a criminal justice agent on her campus that she did not want to return home. Given a prior misdemeanor offense, she was on probation. Eventually her probation officer escorted her home and spoke with her father in person. The officer decided that Aracely's behavior constituted "running away," which was a breach of her probation restrictions and they arrested her. She then ended up in secure detention for the first time as a result.

Annabel also described the abuse she experienced at home and how the beatings she received from her father contributed to her first arrest and subsequent incarceration.

> Me and my father have never been close. Um, and I would always - I felt left out so I'd always go out there on the streets. I would run away a lot and then my father would kick me out. He would call the cops and say that I ran away and I started getting in trouble with the cops.

Diana, 17-years-old, shared a related sentiment,

> They [police] were like hey you fought with your mom. I was like: "what the fuck, like look at my face she beat me up." They are like "she called the cops on you, so you are at fault cause if she beat you up why didn't you call the cops on her?" Dude I don't want to get my mom in trouble and plus anyways it's my word against her and although I am the one looking all torn up.

Aracely, Annabel, and Diana all echoed the same dynamic. They experienced abuse at the hands of their parents. When they attempted to fight back against abuse, avoid their homes or parents, or reported their abuse to institutional actors, like police and teachers, participants often ended up punished. Tragically, girls who run away from home tend to stay away for fear of more family abuse (Díaz-Cotto 2006). This often results in youth participating in behaviors that lead directly to incarceration or to more abuse similar to the types of abuses they attempted to escape. Sadly, this has been a consistent finding within the research on gender and crime for the last 30 years (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004). Other studies have long found that girls can be arrested at the request of their parents for being "incorrigible." Being incorrigible can include: fighting back against abuse, sleeping "all day," not doing chores, challenging parents' authority, overtly expressing sexuality, deviating from heteronormativity, or running away from home (Bettie 2003; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004; Sharma 2010; Winn 2010, 2011). Researchers have long noted that abuse in the home is a major precursor for involvement with the criminal justice system (Bettie 2003; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004; Sharma 2010; Winn 2010, 2011). The experiences of these three girls and the others in our study further confirm this pattern.

Conclusions

This article discussed the multiple forms of abuse girls experience and how this mistreatment can contribute to their eventual incarceration. The girls in this study had to negotiate the constant mistreatment across various institutions and by multiple people with little help from schools or the juvenile justice or child welfare systems. Recent work describes how abuse in the home for girls is a common precursor to future contact with the criminal justice system (Jones 2010). Additionally, the work of feminist criminologists demonstrates how young women must face interpersonal abuse in almost every facet of their lives (Flores 2015; Jones 2010; Rios 2017). The research team expanded on this work by focusing on the unique challenges that the girls in our study experienced. Specifically, the researchers discuss the polyvictimization that girls experience and how these experiences can contribute to future incarceration. Our findings add a new angle to previous findings among incarcerated adult females, which demonstrate high rates of polyvictimization prior to incarceration (Johnson Listwan et al. 2014; Richmond et al. 2009). Some research has suggested that victimization is not inherently related to adult female criminality (Harlow 1999; Mullings et al. 2002); rather, it could be the case that victimization and criminal behavior are connected through "pathways" (Belknap 2001; Bloom et al. 2003; Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004; Salisbury and Van Voorhis 2009). Our article helps to expand this growing body of work of criminal pathways for women. Using life histories across multiple studies, Chesney-Lind and colleagues have suggested that girls may attempt to break free of victimization in their homes by running away, which may in turn lead them to a life of delinquency (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004; Chesney-Lind and Rodriguez 1983; Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004), an argument which is substantiated by participants. Perhaps, then, victimization does not lead directly to incarceration, but instead polyvictimization for young girls increases the risk of involvement in the child welfare and/or criminal justice systems.

This article highlighted how the experiences of girls contribute to their eventual incarceration. As noted in the paper, youth in our study experience multiple and simultaneous forms of abuse. These girls were also mistreated by multiple people in their lives. Additionally, this mistreatment they experienced personally was often exacerbated by the pattern of witnessing others also experience abuse. Finally, the researchers demonstrated how abuse often leads to eventual incarceration. For example, Diana was arrested after her mother beat her and subsequently called the police. Officers ignored her visible signs of abuse and arrested her anyway. Aracely and Annabel both refused to return home or ran away to avoid further physical punishment from their fathers. This behavior then eventually lead to their first arrest and incarceration stint. For these girls, there was little escape from the abuse they experienced. Even when they reported their experiences to institutional actors they were often ignored, returned to abusive homes, or further punished. These findings contribute to our current understanding of the life course, pathways theory/research, and our understanding of how incarcerated girls experience abuse.

Our findings seem to provide some evidence to support the theoretical arguments of Sampson and Laub (1992, 1993) and other life course scholars. Primarily, these scholars argue that weak social bonds with family and their communities contribute to participation in criminal behavior and eventual contact with the criminal justice system (Sampson and Laub 1992, 1993). The research team could argue that the 14 girls included in this paper also had weak social bonds with their families. This is understandable since the bulk of the abuse they experienced was at the hands of their family members, neighbors, and extended kin. Furthermore, our findings confirm those of other scholars which demonstrate that abuse in the home eventually leads to contact with the criminal justice system (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2004; Díaz-Cotto 2006: Simkins et al. 2004; Winn 2010, 2011). With weak social bonds and the inability to build said connections, the experiences of these girls tend to revolve in a feedback loop of punishment and abuse. Our findings support life course theory and also complicate our understanding of how abuse can lead to time behind bars.

There are a few key limitations in this work. First, the paper focused on a small group of girls in one specific location. Although notable, this qualitative study is not generalizable to all the girls who are incarcerated. Further study on girls and boys in different locations would be key, particularly studies that address youth and their various intersecting identities. Additionally, researchers need to explore how other institutions, such as schools and other various components of the child welfare system, help or hinder this population. Specific focus on these might tease out more nuanced distinctions and descriptive data to better understand and address the vulnerabilities and needs of at-risk girls.

Several policy and practice implications should be considered in response to these findings. Girls need to be released from detention into safe homes. Currently, it is common practice for incarcerated girls to be returned to the same homes where they experienced abuse (Winn 2011). We can see how detrimental this can be especially for girls like Aracely, Annabel, and Diana. Given the multiple forms of abuse participants in our study experienced, youth behind bars should also receive extensive therapy to deal with their previous trauma. Additionally, girls need safe spaces like drop-in centers in the community where they can meet their basic needs and find shelter if they are being mistreated. It is imperative that the state provide these spaces. They also need access to three meals a day, education, and the ability to meet their basic needs. Current research suggests this is not happening in the US (Jones 2010). Additionally, it is often poor black and brown youth that suffer the most from this lack of social services. Criminal justice agents should be cautious not to punish these girls for minor offense before investigating if they are being victimized. It is imperative that more research becomes available that showcases girls' direct experiences within juvenile detention. Through this information policymakers, foster care professionals, and law enforcement officers can make a collaborative effort to minimize the harm caused to at-risk girls. Finally, it is important to question whether these girls and other youth like them should ever be incarcerated in the first place given their extensive trauma backgrounds, or whether a more therapeutic environment would be better suited.

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