

# Girls Behaving Violently?

**Michele Burman** describes a research project which challenges notions that girls' violence is irrational, hysterical and pathological.

**T**he 'problem of youth violence' is a contentious issue in current debates about crime and criminal justice policy and, whilst the main focus is on the violence of young males, part of the concern is about the perceived increase in violence by girls and young women. Stories about 'girl gangs' roving the streets and attacking innocent victims appear regularly in the news. In such accounts, girls' violence is presented as a growing problem, a 'rising tide' (Batchelor, 2001). What's more, girls' violence is commonly depicted as more grave and disquieting than that by boys, and as constituting more of a problem. Such violence challenges the codes of hegemonic femininity, and hence is commonly portrayed as an aberration (masculinised, pathologised) or redefined as part of the feminine condition (adolescent girls as emotional, irrational and out of control), denying any form of 'agency' on the part of girls.

## Violent females?

Just how accurate is this image of the 'rising tide' of 'new' violent females? Evidence tends to be drawn from official figures showing that, in recent years, there have been some upward shifts in the pattern of convictions of young women for robbery, burglary and, more markedly, drug and violent offences. In 1981 violence against the person accounted for 6% of all indictable offending by females aged between 10 and 17 years in England and Wales; by 1999 this had risen to 12% (Home Office, 2000). Set against a general background of an overall decrease in the number of juvenile offenders, violence can be said to represent an increasing proportion of offences for which young females are cautioned or convicted. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that these percentage rises represent small increases to low base numbers. Furthermore, the increases tend to be in less serious offence categories, such as common assault, and not in relation to serious assault or homicide. In fact, the general pattern has remained largely unchanged for the past 25 years: females account for a very small percentage of violent crime. Only 7% of those found guilty of a violent offence in Scotland last year were female. The most significant fact about violence is that it is almost always committed by (young) men.

Research undertaken in Scotland as part of the ESRC Violence Programme confirms that violence by girls is rare, in that less than 5% (n= 30) of the 670 girls aged 13-16 years surveyed reported being routinely physically violent towards others. In this

study, we attempted to investigate ordinary teenage girls' views about, and experiences of, violence and violent behaviour within the context of their everyday lives. They reported utilising a number of coping strategies both to manage their own feelings of aggression and to defuse potentially violent encounters (such as talking things out; using humour; walking away). Violence was regarded as a last resort, to be used only in extreme circumstances, such as self-defence or when all other attempts (to avoid, to placate, to defuse) fail.

## The nature of violence

The kinds of violence engaged in by the small proportion of girls who reported using violence routinely and who also described themselves as violent, might best be described as one-on-one fights with other girls or boys. These took the form of 'punch-ups' involving kicking, punching, slapping and hair pulling. Girl-on-girl fights generally have identifiable rules of engagement. They rarely result in injury (apart from pride) and weapons (such as sticks, belts, shoes) are hardly ever used. No girls reported taking part in a robbery and only two were involved in what might be characterised in legal terms as a serious assault. In terms of situational dynamics, most of these encounters involved three key stages: verbal conflict, threats, and physical attack in which retaliation plays a crucial role (Baskin & Sommers, 1998). Some form of personalised, sexualised, or racialised name-calling, insults, or 'slagging-off', along with hostile gesturing and posturing were precursors to the encounters, and the violence that followed was often highly performative. Commonly there is a preoccupation with maintaining respect and self-esteem; with girls using violence when self-worth or confidence or honour is degraded or under threat. In many ways, this is not dissimilar to justifications for violence by young males. Contrary to media accounts of girls preying on innocent victims, violence between girls occurs within the context of their existing social interactions, most often whilst hanging around with other like-minded young people who are just as likely to be involved in conflict.

The girls involved came from a range of backgrounds, but were more likely to have experience of being in care compared with other girls. They reported routinely witnessing physically violent acts; high levels of verbal abuse (towards other young people, to parents, teachers, and carers) and had themselves experienced high levels of physically violent victimisation. This resonates with other



research showing that girls who enact violence have frequently been physically, sexually, and emotionally abused, often by close family members (Artz, 1998). This small group also tended to be spatially mobile (albeit within a fairly small geographical area) with a high 'on-street' presence. Unsurprisingly, they were also more likely to have had police contact and reported higher levels of

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'delinquent' behaviour than other girls in the study. For the most part, however, this behaviour was minor, opportunistic delinquency, such as truancy, alcohol and drug misuse, vandalism, and being generally loud and rowdy in public places, often undertaken in pursuit of 'having a laugh' with friends.

#### **A reconsideration of female agency**

This research, in common with similar work undertaken in the US, suggests a need to move beyond a conceptualisation of girls' violence purely as a response to gendered forms of victimisation

and a need to (re)consider the role of female agency (Artz, 1998; Miller, 2001). Whilst girls' gendered experiences do provide motivations for violence, there are other broader motivational factors, such as disaffection, anger, humiliation and breaches of trust, which are often overlooked in accounts of girls' aggression. Decisions are also structured by peer relations, group processes, and situational motives. Being violent allows some girls to build reputations as tough, not easily fooled, and not to be messed with. It can bring rewards in terms of status and respect. In our study, some girls spoke of feelings of empowerment from using violence; others of enhanced self-esteem, of feeling respected and secure in the knowledge of being labelled 'hard' within a community of peers. These kinds of motivations and incentives challenge the notion that girls' violence is irrational, hysterical and pathological. ■

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#### **References**

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