

Juvenile Delinquent Girls: The Importance of Gender-Responsive Interventions

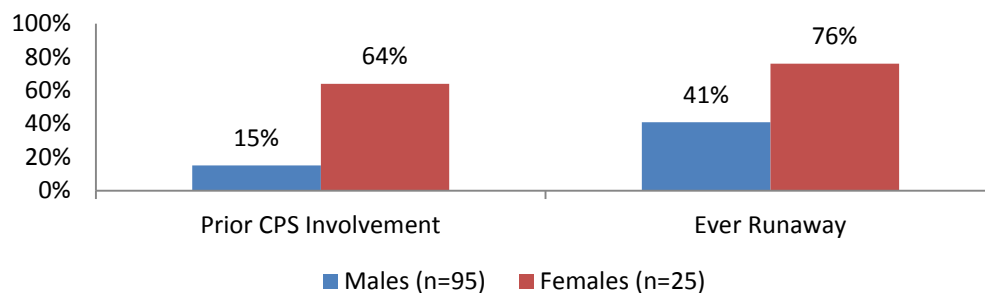
Following the rise in the number of girls entering the juvenile justice system in the early 2000s, public safety stakeholders began to acknowledge the difference between the risks and needs of girls and boys who come into contact with the juvenile justice system and the importance of developing gender-appropriate interventions. While gender-specific services have been incorporated in a number of programs locally,¹ research on the characteristics of juveniles in the system continues to paint an unsettling picture of these differences. Specifically, both national and local studies showing that while girls are more likely to enter the system because of a less serious status offense, such as running away from home or truancy, these offenses are often indicative of more serious problems in their lives pertaining to victimization, substance abuse, and mental health issues.²

Locally, recently released statistics from the San Diego SAM (Substance Abuse Monitoring) Program, which provides annual data on the substance use of youth booked into Juvenile Hall, illustrate some of these alarming differences. As Figure 1 shows, girls interviewed as part of this study were significantly more likely to report that their families had prior involvement with Child Protective Services (CPS) and were also significantly more likely to report running away from home, many times to avoid abusive situations. In addition, as described above, these young females were also significantly more likely than males to report using alcohol at an earlier age; ever trying meth, ecstasy, LSD, and spice; and missing school due to substance use – possible signs of self-medicating and trying to escape unsupportive and possibly unsafe home environments.

**Males vs. Females Arrestees
Substance Use Differences**

- Age First Alcohol Use: 12.9 vs. 11.8
- Ever Meth: 21% vs. 56%
- Ever Ecstasy: 27% vs. 60%
- Ever LSD: 7% vs. 28%
- Ever Spice: 45% vs. 76%
- Miss School Due to Use: 16% vs. 50%

Figure 1
Delinquent Girls More Likely than Boys to Have Problems Related to Their Home Environment



Unfortunately, these results are not an anomaly, as evidenced by similar trends documented in prior SAM reports and research sponsored by the OJJDP's Girls Study Group.² Local stakeholders are encouraged to continue to seek ways to better understand and address the underlying needs of girls through collaborative efforts that span prevention to intervention. The 2013 SAMY report can be obtained on SANDAG's Website (www.sandag.org/cj), where past reports are also available.

¹ One of the earliest regional collaborative efforts was the WINGS program – Working to Insure and Nurture Girls' Success. More information about this program is available at www.sandag.org/cj.

² Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2010). *Girls Study Group: Understanding and Responding to Girls' Delinquency*. Washington, DC: Zahn, M., et al.