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“The Chain Has to Be Broken”: A Qualitative Investigation of the Experiences of Young Women Following Juvenile Court Involvement

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Abstract

Whereas the number of girls involved in the juvenile justice system is on the rise, little is known about female juvenile offenders after they reach adulthood. This study aims to explore the meaning that young adult women ascribe to their juvenile court experiences and assess their perceptions of facilitators and barriers to progress in their adult lives. Data on services and support are presented from nine semistructured interviews. Findings include the commonality of mental health issues, substance abuse, and problematic relationships with intimate partners. Implications for service provision and policy, as well as future research directions, are outlined.

Keywords

gender; juvenile justice; young adults; grounded theory; feminist theory

Introduction

Despite a recent increase in the number of girls involved in the juvenile justice system (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), little information is available on their adult lives following juvenile court involvement. However, other systems, notably child welfare, have recognized the importance of using information on adult outcomes to inform both intervention and policy, as improved adult functioning is an implicit goal of youth-serving systems (Courtney & Barth, 1996; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Geenen & Powers, 2007; Jonson-Reid, Scott, McMillen, & Edmond, 2007). To address the needs of women and girls in this system, it is imperative that feminist scholars add their voices to research with this population and develop an understanding of their trajectories.

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Previous research has found gender-specific patterns of risk for entry into the juvenile justice system. Juvenile court-involved girls have frequently experienced child maltreatment, mental health problems (particularly internalizing disorders), and substance use problems (Acoca, 1998; Burke, 2004; Dixon, Howie, & Starling, 2005; Goldstein et al., 2003; Gover, 2004; Huizinga, Loeber, Thornberry, & Cothorn, 2000; Lederman, Dakof, Larrea, & Li, 2004; McCabe, Lansing, Garland, & Hough, 2002; Obeidallah-Davis, 2002). Family problems, such as poor family relationships, parent criminality, parent mental health problems, and parent substance use, are also common risk factors noted in court-involved female youth (Calhoun, 2001; Galbavy, 2003; Goldstein et al., 2003; Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005; Leve & Chamberlain, 2004; McCabe et al., 2002; Rhodes & Fischer, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1989).

The majority of available research on court-involved adult women has been conducted with incarcerated populations, limiting its generalizability, but it suggests that risk factors for adult female criminality are very similar to the risks identified in the literature for female juvenile delinquency. Adult female offenders often present with mental and physical health needs and substance abuse, lack educational and vocational skills and supports, come from impoverished backgrounds, and have histories of early pregnancy (Aderibigbe, Arboleda-Florez, & Crisante, 1996; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Gilfus, 1992; Green, Miranda, Darowalla, & Siddique, 2005; Martin & Hesselbrock, 2001; Sacks, 2004; Staton, Leukefeld, & Webster, 2003).

Despite the considerable commonality of risk factors described above, it is largely unknown to what extent juvenile court-involved girls' experiences persist unaltered throughout the life course and to what extent they change as individuals develop. Follow-up studies of incarcerated delinquent girls found the majority of them to have continued criminal activity into adulthood, and found poverty and victimization to be common adult experiences (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Lowery, 2004; Rosenbaum, 1989). Among women as well as men, serious, violent, and chronic delinquent behavior is a predictor of adult criminality (Kempf-Leonard, Tracy, & Howell, 2001). As noted earlier, child maltreatment has commonly been found to be a risk factor for juvenile delinquency. In addition, it has been posited that maltreated girls are more likely than other girls to go on to adult criminal careers (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Dodge (2004) asserted that aggressive adolescent women will eventually consume a disproportionate share of publicly funded resources. Questions remain, however, about the lived experiences of women who have transitioned from the juvenile justice system.

This study aims to explore the meaning that young adult women ascribe to their juvenile court experiences and assess their perceptions of the major facilitators and barriers to progress in their young adulthood. This is in keeping with a feminist research agenda, with women's lives as important topics of study (Hartsock, 1990) and gender as a vital organizing construct (Morawski, 1997). The present research places particular emphasis on juvenile and adult services, supportive and unsupportive individuals and institutions, and service needs. As the focus is on lived experience, qualitative interview methods are applied to learn about and interpret this experience (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, & Tindall, 1994; Polkinghome, 2005).

Method

Sample

Data were collected through semistructured interviews with a purposive sample of 9 women in a Midwestern metropolitan region who volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were community-dwelling women who self-identified as having been juvenile court clients as children or adolescents and had received services through the juvenile justice system.

Participants were recruited through flyers placed in public areas and businesses, a newspaper advertisement in a local paper, and talking with clients and contacts of a local agency. The agency provides voluntary services to women who have been involved with the criminal justice system and/or who have problems with drug or alcohol abuse. In all, 3 women (2 African American and 1 White) were recruited through the media and flyer advertising, and 6 women (4 African American and 2 White) were recruited as currently involved with or otherwise known to the agency.

Data Collection

Individual, semistructured interviewing was selected as the data collection method because of its versatility and participatory focus. As Reinharz and Davidman (1992) have noted, "Interviews are particularly important for the study of women because this way of learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women" (p. 19). To pursue this method of inquiry, data collection procedures were as follows.

After initial recruitment, respondents were screened in person or by telephone to determine eligibility. The first author then conducted and audio recorded individual interviews with 8 of the 9 participants. With the remaining participant, written notes were used in lieu of audio recording due to her preferences. The second author served as cointerviewer during six of the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 60 min. Participants were each presented with US\$25 at the beginning of the interview, in order to ensure that they did not feel coerced to answer all questions before receiving remuneration. The money was provided in recognition of the time and effort participants devoted to the interview process. In addition, transportation vouchers were mailed in advance of the interview to participants without their own transportation.

Interviewers referred to a list of potential questions while conducting the semistructured interviews (see Appendix A). This interview guide included questions about women's entry into the juvenile justice system, the system's response and their opinions about this response, and their accomplishments and difficulties since that time. A particular focus of the interviews was formal and informal supports, or lack thereof.

Special procedures were implemented to protect the confidentiality of research participants. In addition to the approval of the Washington University Human Research Protection Office, the National Institutes of Health issued a Certificate of Confidentiality to protect any sensitive information from forcible disclosure through subpoena (information regarding maltreatment or suicidal intent was not covered by this certificate, however).

Theory

This study was conducted from a feminist perspective, using grounded theory to inform data analysis. Initially codified by Glazer and Strauss (1967), grounded theory is conceptualized as a way to make sense of qualitative data by using it to create theory, rather than collecting data in accordance with a priori hypotheses about variables and their relationships. In grounded theory, the goal of data analysis is to generate theory based on observed relationships among themes, using an iterative process of inductive and deductive analysis (Bernard, 2006). A grounded theory approach to interpreting interview data acknowledges participants to be the experts of their own experience (Charmaz, 2000).

This more egalitarian approach to research, along with the ability to consider complex narrative information as valuable data, makes grounded theory a valid standpoint from which to conduct a feminist study of a phenomenon (Keddy, Sims, & Stern, 1996). Furthermore, encouraging women's voices is essential to conducting feminist research (Wilkinson, 1986), and valuing the participants' expertise may be particularly appropriate with African American participants, who constitute the majority of the sample and may be cautious about mainstream, traditional research (Ward, 2005). This study used a structured interview guide, which could have potentially limited the extent to which participants shared the information most important to them. In order to mitigate this, we concluded interviews with the question, "Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you want me to know about you, your life, or your juvenile court experiences?"

Data Analysis

After the interview data were collected, they were transcribed for coding. In accordance with the grounded theory approach, codes, or themes, were not constructed in advance. Rather, they were created from the data. In order to decrease the subjectivity inherent in coding transcripts, two researchers (the first and second authors) coded the data in tandem. The purpose of this joint work was to determine the appropriateness of coding transcript sections as reflecting various themes (Scattolon & Stoppard, 1999). Throughout the process, both coders sought to connect information to emerging themes and to identify exceptions to prior findings. Coding differences were reconciled through discussion.

Following coding, in-depth analysis of constructs and relationships occurred, during which time constant comparison methods were used to search for themes and exceptions (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). Theoretical associations among constructs were created (Bernard, 2006). To illustrate these relationships, respondents' quotes were reproduced directly as exemplars of the concepts resulting from the analysis (Bernard, 2006).

Results

The 9 women interviewed were between the ages of 22 and 39, with a mean age of 29.89 ($SD = 5.18$). Six of the 9 were African American, and the remaining 3 were White (non-Latina). All became involved with the juvenile court based on petitions for status (i.e., noncriminal) or delinquent offenses; the sample consisted of 4 status and 5 delinquent

offenders. Three of these women became parents during adolescence, and 4 became parents in adulthood. Two women reported having no children.

Themes were identified within the following broad categories: juvenile justice contact, maltreatment and victimization, neighborhood risk, interaction with other systems, support, accomplishments and goals, relationships with men, children, and adult outcomes. These themes are listed in Table 1, with illustrative examples taken from the interview data.

Juvenile Justice Contact

Participants described a continuum of meanings ascribed to their juvenile court experiences. They became involved with juvenile court for a range of offenses, from running away to committing a serious assault. The juvenile justice system response to these individuals also varied considerably. Some were briefly held in detention, others had only supervision or probation services, and still others were placed outside the home in family or group foster care settings. One spent several years in a residential facility. Meanings attributed to the juvenile court experiences varied based on their individual contexts. For example, Robin (all participants' names have been changed to protect their confidentiality), 34 years old and African American, relayed that her placement outside the home in an unfamiliar town led to an adolescent suicide attempt. She said she tried and failed to fit in to the new environment.

I mean, just the whole totally different way of living, you know, and I couldn't get with it. So, I chickened out. I cowed out. I went in the bathroom and took all of the medicine in the medicine cabinet.

Camille, a 25-year-old African American participant, described the lack of impact of being petitioned or served in the system: "It was pointless to me ... kids took [juvenile court intervention] as a joke." Others felt the experience was difficult at the time but believe some good came from the situation. Sheronda, a 39-year-old African American woman, noted that she learned to make different choices. "It was ... a scared straight kind of thing." A 22-year-old African American participant, Antoinette, described her time in detention as "horrible" but stated "I did get a chance to, like, grow up a little bit more and to be on my own." Lynne, a 28-year-old African American participant, believed that though her initial contacts with the juvenile justice system in detention and group home placements did not have much impact on her, a long-term placement in an out-of-town facility was extremely helpful.

It bettered me.... Different environment helped me a lot.... People at that group home took time out.... They cared.... [One staff member] acted like she was a mother to me.

Melinda, 30 years old and White, shared a similar reflection of the value of caring staff members who had experienced problems of their own: "Then, the ladies were all really nice. Cause, all the girls that worked with me ... went through the same thing."

When asked how the juvenile justice system could better respond to girls, interview participants described the importance of building relationships and offering positive role models. Sheronda stated, "Nowadays, girls need guidance, and they're not getting it.... We need more female mentors." Lynne had the following advice for practitioners working with this population:

Take time.... We depend on that support and that bond with somebody that we can talk to and trust and confide in.

Maltreatment, Victimization, and Family Relationships

Participants were asked about barriers during their adolescence and adulthood. Eight of the 9 women described victimization at the hands of caregivers, intimate partners, and others. Childhood sexual abuse was the most common form of maltreatment disclosed, reported in four of the narratives. Two women characterized their mothers as disbelieving their reports of sexual abuse and found this lack of trust particularly painful.

I had got child molested, and my mom ... gave up custody.... She always said I was lying about the abuse, and that I was making things up, and she ... didn't want to believe it. (Lynne)

Participants also endured child neglect and parental abandonment, as well as rape and physical violence at the hands of male partners. One was hospitalized after a partner battered her severely.

Additional problems within the family were prominent in the narratives of most participants. Whereas 3 participants did not discuss troubled relationships in their families of origin, 2 of the 3 described a history of criminal activity and substance abuse within the family. Four participants grew up in two-parent families, and one of these reported relatively little conflict in the family during her childhood. The other 3, however, struggled to get along with their parents. Four interviewees lived in single-parent households for most or all of their childhoods. One was raised by her father when her mother left the family, and 3 lived with single mothers. A final participant was raised by various family members, moving among parents, grandparents, and other relatives.

One participant grew up with a mother diagnosed with bipolar disorder; she was not always capable of meeting the emotional needs of the children in the family. This participant also witnessed conflict between her mother and a series of men. Another interviewee described her mother's religious conversion, after which time she found her to be unavailable to the children. Parental alcohol abuse was disclosed in two interviews. One interviewee discussed her father's threats and punitive attitude toward her. Melinda reported that her mother "used to say, like, you're never going to amount to nothing ... she would just call [my sister and me] whores and stuff like that." Debbie, a 27-year-old White woman, was raised by relatives and stated, "During my childhood my mother was pretty much non-existent." Lynne attributed her juvenile court involvement to emotional disconnection from her mother. She felt her history with the juvenile court could have been prevented:

If I had the support of my mom, love, caring, and the bond with my mom.... It wasn't no bond, it was just chaos.

Neighborhoods and Risk

One set of risk factors, or barriers to progress, was prominent with a particular group of interviewees. All 6 African American participants described their childhood neighborhoods as dangerous and as contributing to their development in a negative way. In explaining the

increase in risk of substance use and violence, Sheronda stated, “Growing up in the city, you were privy to things.” Camille described her neighborhood with these words:

It was just harsh, hard. You had to be a rough kid.... It was a place that should have been condemned a long time ago. It was just a little, small, miniature ghetto. Every day people getting shot. You stand on the sidewalk, you know, somebody running by with a gun, kids getting ran over, people sneaking in people’s windows, raping people, you know. It was horrible.

Respondents described murders, drugs, and gang violence. One was threatened with a gun as a teenager, another was attacked with a knife, and a third lost her brother to a gang-related shooting.

Interaction With Other Systems

Several of the participants discussed the negative impact other systems had on them during childhood and how this was a barrier for them. Two were placed in foster care through the child welfare system, one due to parental neglect and the other due to her mother’s mental health problems (as described earlier). Both characterized these experiences as troubling. Karen, a 30-year-old White participant, said, “Some of the foster homes were really bad ... it’s like [no one in the child welfare system] wanted to listen to what I had to say [about my living conditions].”

Additional participants identified the failures of broader systems as leading to their juvenile offending behavior. One explained that an assault she had been involved in occurred after she had made requests to school authorities to intervene and resolve a dispute among peers. Camille described her childhood theft as a response to the lack of income maintenance and child support her family received. She reported that her juvenile court involvement could have been prevented if

the welfare system would have been a little bit better for my mom because she couldn’t afford to survive.... She couldn’t get section 8 ... If the welfare system would have offered a lot more help it would have been a lot easier.... [Also] child support would’ve helped an awesome amount.... [My father has] been ordered to pay child support for me for twenty-five years and he’s never paid a dime.

Most of the women interviewed reflected negatively on the income maintenance system. One applied for TANF and found she was eligible for US\$234 per month to support herself and her daughter; she decided the money was not worth the trouble of becoming involved with this system. Another woman was ineligible as she had exceeded the 5-year lifetime limit. A third applied for SSI and was denied. She stated that she is considering appealing the decision but finds the process daunting. A fourth woman reported receiving US\$10 per month in food stamps for her family of four. Some of the women had become involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems with their own children.

Support

In reflecting on their childhood and adolescence, participants described a number of supportive relationships that facilitated their ability to get through challenging times. Despite

their family problems, most felt that their immediate family members were supportive, at least some of the time. The 2 women who had spent the most time in juvenile justice placements reported that they did not have the support of their immediate families as they were growing up. One could not identify a supportive person or group from that stage of her life. The other described social workers and staff members as particularly helpful.

A number of the women mentioned maintaining ongoing relationships with friends from childhood, as well as with extended family members such as aunts, cousins, and grandparents. Teachers played a prominent role in five of the narratives as they were described as supportive of the women's intellectual abilities. Participants characterized these teachers as willing to devote extra time and energy to help them with homework and encourage them to stay in school. One woman had an ongoing relationship with a former English teacher to the present day and reported that they talked often by phone about writing and communication.

Four women were participants in post-prison reentry programs and substance-related support groups. One saw a private therapist as well. They described their providers as committed to helping them accomplish their goals and as willing to help meet their physical needs (housing, food, etc.) as well as their emotional needs. As Melinda put it, "I love the program [I am currently attending] ... if it wasn't for them, I don't know, I'd probably be back in prison."

Accomplishments and Goals

Every woman in the sample had completed either a high school diploma or a GED. All but one had pursued college or vocational training. Participants also had substantial work experience, particularly in service-oriented careers. Most began working as teenagers, and interviewees' pride in their work ethic was evident: "I've always worked a job ... When I work, I mean like, I'm a very, very, hard worker" (Camille). Despite their experience and attitudes toward work, only 3 of the 9 women had stable employment at the time of their interviews. All but one of the participants described goals to obtain work or to change jobs. Further education and training were stated plans of 6 women.

I'm going to school for Business Administration. I want to open my own business. I want to have my own business up and running in 2010. (Antoinette).

The women described motherhood as an accomplishment and as a source of their ongoing goals. Faith, a 34-year-old African American participant, said:

I'm proud that I am a good mother.... My children are my biggest accomplishment. It is very important to me to see them graduate high school and go on to college.

As described in more detail below, not all the participants had custody of their children. For each of these women, having their children living in their homes full-time was a stated goal.

Five participants explained that giving back to others in need was among their accomplishments. One helped others by feeding the hungry and housing the homeless in her own home. Another volunteered at her church in food and hygiene drives and also led a women's group. A third had worked professionally with individuals with substance abuse

problems. Two women had spoken about their experiences to at-risk and court-involved youth. Faith said:

I get a great deal out of that, because ... nobody was there like that for me when I was coming up ... I really have a heart for people that's struggling.

Relationships With Men

The participants described diverse attitudes toward the men in their lives. In the case of 2 women, their long-term male partners were behind bars. For both, the future of the relationship was unknown. Karen stated:

At this point in time, I really don't know, because I've had some conversations with him on the phone lately that have really kind of bothered me. And I just don't know if he's where I'm at mentally... I don't know that he's there with me at that point, and that scares me, because I definitely don't want him to bring me back down.

Three women described having mutually supportive and fulfilling relationships with male partners. All of them contrasted these partnerships with previous situations in which they had experienced victimization.

My life, everything went downhill after [my ex] beat me.... I met [my current partner] last year, and everything changed, you know what I'm saying, because he didn't look at me for sex and all that. He's just talking and we communicating.
(Lynne)

The remaining 4 participants did not describe current relationships with men. Sheronda stated that she is "too independent" for a serious relationship, and 2 other women indicated that motherhood took a central role in their lives, superseding the importance of developing other relationships. A final participant described herself as a lesbian involved in a committed and healthy relationship with a woman.

Men played key roles in some of the young adult outcomes experienced in this sample. This issue is explored in more detail below.

Children

Seven of the 9 women interviewed were mothers. An eighth woman discussed her plans to have children in the future. For these 8 participants, children were a key piece of their motivation. A common sentiment was that they could teach their children to make better choices than they themselves had made. As Robin noted, "I try to encourage my kids to do right and not follow in my footsteps.... I want them to be better than me." Antoinette, one of the childless women, echoed the same sentiment: "Lord knows I don't want my [future] kids to ever have to go through this situation." Participants described the motherhood role as causing them to change their behavior. Robin stated, "I was a mother then, so all that other stuff I had to stop doing." Camille said, "My daughter ... deserves better than that and somewhere down the line the chain has to be broken."

Despite the consistency with which participants attributed success to their relationships with children, these relationships were not without significant difficulty. Five of the women had

children living outside their care. Another had recently been reunited with her daughter, after leaving her with relatives for a period of several months. The majority of these separations were due to the women's inability to adequately care for children during periods of incarceration and/or substance use. In two cases, children were placed outside the home due to their own juvenile justice involvement.

Adult Outcomes

In addition to the participant who described an adolescent suicide attempt, 3 women reported experiencing mental health difficulties in adulthood. One mentioned recurring depressive episodes in early adulthood, and another recounted a suicide attempt during this developmental stage. Neither recalled having received services to address these problems. Faith explained that she had experienced a "nervous breakdown," in which she had felt paranoid and been unable to sleep. Since that time, she worked with an outpatient mental health service provider to deal with these symptoms; she reported that they had improved considerably.

Substance abuse was a concern for 5 of the 9 women. Participants reported engaging in criminal behavior to procure drugs. These acts encompassed prostitution, theft, and robbery. One woman reported being served through publicly funded inpatient treatment. Three noted ongoing or previous long-term participation in 12-step programs, which they found helpful. One was essentially forced by her family to sober up as they kept her under a close watch and did not allow her access to substances. Karen described prison as an experience that required her to quit using drugs:

I thank God for every day of it. I really do, because it took me going to prison to realize that I had a problem and how bad it was. And then, all that time that they forced me to be clean, you know, each day showed me how much better things could be.... I would have never gotten clean if it wasn't for that.

Four of the 5 women who described struggles with substance use drew connections between drug use and the men in their lives. They initiated using because this was what their intimate partners were doing. Two were arrested on drug charges while with their male partners, and another participated in a robbery with a partner. The fifth participant with a history of substance abuse attributed this problem to her family and friends' drug use; she was also the one woman in the sample who identified as a lesbian.

Another young adult outcome experienced in this sample was arrest. Seven of the 9 women had been arrested after becoming adults and experienced varied system responses including jail time, probation, and prison sentences. Karen was not the only participant who found prison to be ultimately helpful. Another described her prison sentence as a time to read, think, and prepare for a better life upon her release. She left prison feeling stronger and more confident.

Debbie shared that, though prison was not an enjoyable experience for her, she found a great deal of support in the circle of friends she made while in prison. According to her, "The bonds that you form in [prison] are unbreakable." Similarly, Melinda's prison experience was not positive; however, she stated that it served as an effective deterrent to her subsequent

behavior: “I always think about the situation I’m in, could it [cause] me to go back to prison ... Could this affect my freedom?”

Other women reflected negatively on their experiences with the adult criminal justice system. One reported feeling afraid at being arrested and taken to jail. She described the police as hostile and the conditions as unsanitary and overcrowded. Two participants mentioned that their career opportunities had been severely hampered by their arrest records.

A final young adult experience appeared in the narratives of 4 women who reported disappearing for a number of months at a time, 3 of them leaving their children in the care of relatives. Two attributed this to drug use, another characterized it as an immature behavior and just wanting to get away, and the fourth, Lynne, did not articulate her specific reasons for leaving:

I left... I was just missing in action for six months.... They wondered why did I disappear, because I was doing so good, and it happened. So, I don’t even know how to explain it, it just, stuff happened, you know.

Service Needs and Use

Participants orally completed a Service Needs Checklist during the interview. They were asked whether they were currently using, had recently used, were in need of, or did not need a series of services such as health, dental, and education resources for children or adults, in-kind resources, training, and counseling services. The participants identified high levels of service need. Of the 18 items (including an “Other” category), participants reported needing between 0 and 11 services to which they did not have current access. Participants identified a mean of 4.4 unmet needs ($SD = 3.4$). At the time of the interviews, participants reported accessing between 0 and 10 services, with a mean of 4.4 current or recent services ($SD = 3.5$). Although participants were obviously capable of accessing some services, they appeared to need, on average, twice as many social services as they presently received. The most common services received were in the form of relatives or Medicaid covering child needs, such as daycare and child medical or dental needs. Six of the 9 women received food assistance through food stamps or food pantry use, but beyond this few had access to the adult and in-kind needs they reported needing.

Discussion

Because this is a small study, its findings are tentative and not intended to promote comprehensive theoretical propositions. Nevertheless, the assertions of the sample with regard to gendered patterns of risk and support largely echo previous findings among court-involved female populations. Many of the women interviewed here endured traumatic experiences common among female youth, as in the case of childhood sexual abuse (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994), or frequently occurring in women and potentially extremely damaging to them, as with intimate partner violence (Coker, Smith, McKeown, & King, 2000; Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005). The role of women as primary caregivers for their children is also likely to operate in a gender-specific way. Of the 7 mothers interviewed for the study, only 2 have regular contact with their children’s fathers, and in both cases, the

men are currently in prison. Meanwhile, even the women who do not have their children in their care report regular visitation and plans for their children to return home. Theory development and service provision in this area must take the mother role into account.

Maltreatment and victimization, family problems, neighborhood-level poverty and crime, and a lack of support from larger-scale institutions such as income maintenance and school systems are among the factors respondents perceive as contributing to their juvenile court involvement. Mental health problems are also reported in the sample. These issues are consistent with the risk factors described in the female juvenile justice population as a whole.

The findings with respect to neighborhood risk, ethnicity, and juvenile justice involvement are intriguing and suggest avenues for research and theory development. The stories of the African American women speak to the struggles of living with multiple oppressed identities (Collins, 1990). Prior empirical evidence relating neighborhood to crime among girls is mixed, however, largely suggesting that neighborhood effects are stronger in boys than girls (see Kroneman, Loeber, & Hipwell, 2004, for a review of this literature). Given the descriptions all 6 African American participants give of their childhood neighborhoods, future research with larger samples is recommended to reinvestigate possible relationships between neighborhood and risk for girls of color in particular. It is important to note that though no White participants have volunteered information about neighborhood risk factors, it is possible that these issues are present for them as well but not uncovered during the interviews. It will be important to disaggregate effects of poverty and ethnicity and to understand what specific aspects of community, such as available supports, may be more relevant to women and girls in preventing offending behavior.

Adult substance use and criminal justice system outcomes appear to be more complex than a continuation of childhood behaviors into adulthood. First, the role of relationships with men is crucial to both of these outcomes. Participants commonly report being exposed to these behaviors and influenced by their male partners. Although women are agents of their own behavior, to a certain degree they can be seen as exploited or victimized in relationships in which they hold unequal decision-making authority. Second, the two outcomes are inextricably linked. Criminal behavior can result from the need to “do illegal things to get money to get the dope,” as Karen put it. Both addictions and relationships with men have been documented in the literature as criminogenic among women (Gilfus, 1992; Miller, 1998; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1998).

Other young adult outcomes are critical pieces of some of the narratives. Mental health needs and “disappearing” in adulthood are worthy of further investigation and theory development, to determine more specifically how they relate to women’s functioning and outcomes.

The motherhood role in and of itself does not necessarily prevent problematic behaviors in adulthood. Women describe being arrested, using drugs, and “disappearing,” despite having children in their lives. Nonetheless, children seem to represent a motivation to continue striving for change and working to set a positive example. The role of children in changes

throughout the life cycle is worthy of further consideration. For example, some feminist theory (Daly, 1994) has suggested that motherhood is protective, but many of the women with children experienced poor outcomes in this sample. Perhaps the relevant question for further research is how child rearing may have an impact on future choices even among women who have already had an untoward outcome. Do mothers relapse or experience arrest less frequently than childless women? Do women who retain custody fare better than those whose children are placed outside their care?

Implications for Service Provision and Policy

The results of this research have implications for services to girls and young women prior to, during, and after juvenile court involvement. Preventive interventions should strengthen family relationships and deal with issues related to maltreatment and victimization. Girls living in high-crime neighborhoods may be particularly appropriate targets for prevention services. Gender-specific interventions to treat girls within the juvenile justice system can follow the advice of these participants and the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women (1999). Female role models and mentors can be utilized to strengthen relationships as a number of participants articulate this as a potential preventative mechanism for court involvement.

To the extent that this sample is similar to other girls who have left the juvenile justice system, we can expect that these girls are likely to become parents by young adulthood and also may have needs related to substance use and mental health. They could benefit from resources designed to work with victims of intimate partner violence, as well as trauma-focused interventions directed at resolving persistent symptoms of child maltreatment. The educational accomplishments of this sample suggest that young adult women with juvenile court involvement in their histories are interested in and capable of taking advantage of opportunities to learn new skills and that job creation and other employment assistance programs may benefit them.

As Goodkind (2005) has emphasized, the juvenile justice system must avoid blaming female youth for the failures of other systems. The results of this study suggest that other systems can act to prevent juvenile court involvement and support women who have left the juvenile justice system. In particular, enhanced income maintenance and child support, as well as additional attention within the educational environment, can serve this population at various stages of their development. An awareness of the overlap between child welfare and juvenile justice systems is essential; the child welfare system may be able to help prevent additional juvenile court contact and may interact with former juvenile court clients in their capacity as parents. Given that the women in this sample have or expect to regain custody of their children, improving parenting skills and supports for this population may be an appropriate objective for the child welfare system.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

This is the first known study to use qualitative interviewing techniques and a feminist perspective in an attempt to understand the experiences of young women who were involved with the juvenile justice system as children. The study is exploratory, with a limited sample

of 9 interview participants. Although broad themes can be identified in a qualitative sample as small as 6 participants, true saturation, or a situation in which no new information is gleaned, is unlikely in such a small sample (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). This work is designed to inform future work rather than assert firm conclusions.

A number of limitations based on the sample and methods must be acknowledged. It is unknown to what extent those who responded are similar to other young adult women who were involved in juvenile court, as the sample is limited by the recruitment strategies used. Three participants self-identified based on advertisements, and the remaining 6 were located through an agency that serves women with specific needs related to criminal justice system involvement and substance use. Although not all 6 were current clients of the agency, the sample still consists mainly of women known to other service sectors, like the child welfare and income maintenance systems. The outcomes of women not involved in these systems remain largely unexplored. Because 6 of the respondents are known to a service agency and an additional participant has a history of service use, this sample may be biased to the extent that their comments reflect content covered in their work with helping professionals.

Ethnicity and socioeconomic status are important considerations in interpreting the data. Whereas the majority of the sample is African American, the two interviewers are White, which could have had an impact on the comfort of participants in disclosing sensitive information. However, research has indicated that empathetic regard is more crucial to efforts to collect valid data versus the ethnicity of interviewers (Sawyer et al., 1995). The size of the sample limits our ability to compare responses by ethnicity. Furthermore, no women who do not identify as African American or White are represented in these interviews. Most of the women in the sample earn little money or are not employed, so it is possible that the US\$25 provided to participants could constitute a coercive incentive. It should be noted that no participant elected to discontinue the interviews despite the money being provided at the outset and the explanation that the participant could end the interview at any point without penalty.

Participants' beliefs about their juvenile justice involvement and their perceptions of risk and protective factors are captured here, as are their motivation and goals, their informal supports and barriers, and their education and employment history. The meanings participants ascribe to their experiences are essential to feminist research (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992) and to research describing a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study explores these meanings as a beginning step to understand the pathways women take into and out of the juvenile justice system.

Future work on this topic may sample from a representative frame of juvenile court-involved girls and follow them into adulthood. Prospective, longitudinal interviews will allow researchers to capture participants' experiences and their interpretation of those experiences at the times they occur. Such studies can minimize recall errors in reporting of past events. This method also allows for examination of how women's perceptions of their experiences change over time.

Conclusion

Overall, these profiles of women with prior juvenile court histories include a mix of past trauma and barriers as well as strengths that may provide an opportunity for intervention. Interviewees describe gender-specific patterns of maltreatment and victimization, family conflict, the failure of other systems to support them, and struggles with adult mental health problems, substance use, and criminality. They describe drawing motivation from their roles as mothers. These women have accomplished various educational and vocational goals and receive support from family, friends, and, in some cases, service providers. That the strengths center around relationships with family and others may be an important theme for intervention and are consistent with efforts to create more gender-specific interventions for female offenders.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Note: Interviews were semistructured. This list served as a guide for the interviewers, rather than as a script.

- You told me on the phone that you went to juvenile court when you were younger. Can you tell me more about what brought you to court in the first place?
 - After you went to court, what happened? (probes about services)
 - Did you ever pick up any other charges as a juvenile?
 - What is your opinion of the services you received? Did this help you in any way?
 - If you could change the kinds of services girls receive because of their juvenile court involvement, what changes would you make?
 - What do you think would have helped you avoid juvenile court in the first place?
 - When you think about your life at that time, can you think of any people, or groups, or things that were helpful to you or gave you support? (probes about the type of support)
 - Can you think of any people, groups, or things in your life at that time that were *not* helpful or supportive for you?
 - Now I want to ask you some questions about things that have changed in your life since that time. What are some ways your life has changed? What are some ways your life has not changed?
 - Can you think of any major accomplishments you've had since the time you were in juvenile court? (probe about education and employment if she doesn't bring it up)
 - What about some major problems you've had? How were you able to deal with these problems?
 - When you think about the people, groups, and things in your life now, which are the most helpful or supportive? Which are the least helpful or supportive?
 - When you think about your future, what are the major goals you have for yourself?
 - What in your life can help you meet your goals?
 - Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you want me to know about you, your life, or your juvenile court experiences?
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Table 1

Categories, Themes, and Illustrations From Interviews

Category	Themes	Illustrative quotations or characterizations
Juvenile justice contact	Negative or no impact	"It was pointless to me."
	Positive impact	"It bettered me.... Different environment helped me a lot."
	Role models	"We need more female mentors."
Maltreatment and victimization	Child maltreatment	"I had got child molested, and my mom ... always said I was lying ..."
	Lack of family support	"[M]y mother was pretty much non-existent."
	Intimate partner violence	"Disclosure of rape and physical violence perpetrated by male partners."
	Emotional abuse/neglect	"[My mother] would just call [my sister and me] whores..."
Neighborhood risk	Prevalent violence/substance abuse	"Every day people getting shot.... It was horrible."
		"Growing up in the city, you were privy to things."
Interaction with other systems	Child welfare system	History of foster care, characterized as a negative experience.
	Income maintenance system	"If the welfare system would have offered a lot more help it would have been a lot easier."
Support	Family support	Continuum from very supportive to not at all supportive.
	Teacher support	Willing to devote time and energy to participants.
	Support from services	Committed to meeting both physical and emotional needs.
Accomplishments and goals	Employment and education	"I want to open my own business."
	Motherhood	"My children are my biggest accomplishment."
	Giving back	"I really have a heart for people that's struggling."
Relationships with men	Incarcerated male partners	"I definitely don't want him to bring me back down."
	Supportive relationships	"He's just talking and we communicating."
	No current relationships	"[I am] too independent" for a serious relationship.
Children	Teaching by negative example	"I try to encourage my kids to ... not follow in my footsteps."
	Impetus to change behavior	"My daughter ... deserves better than that ... the chain has to be broken."
	Separations from children	Five women had children living with relatives or placed outside the home.
Adult outcomes	Mental health status	"[I experienced a] nervous breakdown."
	Substance abuse	Related to criminal activity, service use, and relationships with males.
	Arrest	"I always think ... could [this situation cause] me to go back to prison?"
	Disappearing	"I was just missing in action for six months."