

GIRL VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION: PROBLEM AND SOLUTIONS



**A report by the
Cook County Commission on Women's Issues**

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Introduction

On October 20, 2005, the Cook County Commission on Women's Issues, in partnership with GIRLS LINK, held its annual public hearing on the topic of "Girl Violence and Aggression: Problems and Solutions."

The Commission selected this topic because of the number of reports suggesting a dramatic rise in girls arrested for violence-related offenses, as well as sensationalized news accounts of groups of teen girls fighting. Interested in whether the statistics and the home videos told an accurate or complete story, the Commission decided to explore in more depth whether or why girl violence is on the rise, the causes of such real or perceived increase in violent behavior, and what needs to be done to address the problem.

The Commission heard testimony from a range of speakers including girls, academics, government officials and girl-serving organizations. Speakers presented information on the complex causes of girl-on-girl violence, prevention measures, and recommendations for change. Speakers included:

- Earnest Jamison, GIRLS LINK
- Jessica Palmert, Girl World
- Maya Yancey-Gilmore, Girl World
- Mistura Salami, Girl World
- Dr. Laurie Schaffner, Department of Criminal Justice, University of Illinois at Chicago
- Kathleen Monahan, Clerk of the Circuit Court Domestic Violence Program
- Wenona Thompson, GIRL TALK
- Melissa Spooner, Project RENEW, Cook County Juvenile Probation
- Leslie Kennedy, The Chicago Girls Coalition

This report is based on the information presented by the speakers at the hearing, current research and literature on girls and violence, and the Commission's work with various County agencies.

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KEY FINDINGS

I am tired of being bad; I am tired of not being loved; I am tired of not living life right; I am tired of making dumb mistakes; I am tired of being locked down; I am tired of being brought down; I am tired of letting people down; I am tired of disrespecting people; I am tired of being disrespected; I am tired of not having a father; I am tired of being in the system; I am tired of being a grade behind; I am tired of feeling weak; I am tired of feeling alone; I am tired of thinking; I am tired of not being heard; I am tired of not using the best of my ability to achieve in life; I am tired of family issues; I am tired of being tired; I am tired of any and everything; Just tired.

- Chicago teen on probation

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: WHAT GIRLS SAY ABOUT WHY THEY FIGHT

“Oh No She Didn’t...” The Truth Behind Girl on Girl Violence

The study “‘On no she didn’t...’ the truth behind girl-on-girl violence” was conducted and led by girls through Girl World, a gender-specific, after-school program for girls. The study was funded by the Girls’ Best Friend Foundation with technical assistance from the Loyola University Center of Urban Research and Learning. Surveys and interviews were conducted with youth of 14-18 years old from five Chicago area high schools. The participating youth included females and males of all races, but the majority were African American. Maya Yancey-Gilmore and Mistura Salami, participants in Girl World, reported on the findings of the study which suggest three main themes related to girl-on-girl violence :

- The media promotes girl-on-girl violence by infusing examples of such violence in movies, songs, advertisements, talk shows, and the web, and by sexualizing these images.
- If young women felt that they were successful and powerful in other areas of their lives, then they wouldn’t feel the need to beat up or tear down other girls. Building girls’ self-esteem and empowering them with viable life choices would go a long way toward preventing and mitigating girls’ violence.

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- Despite the fact that many youth report that what girls fight over is “stupid,” suggesting that boys and girls think girls’ issues are insignificant and meaningless, many young women getting seriously hurt fighting. Girls report using brass knuckles, pad locks, chains and rings as weapons. Girls attempt to protect their looks by putting Vaseline on their faces to protect from scratching, wrapping up their hair to prevent it from being pulled out, and taking off their earrings so they do not get pulled out.

Sample quotes from girls and boys interviewed for study:

“Girls appear to be competing for boys, power over other girls, looks, and popularity. Girl-on-girl fights are perceived of as entertaining because boys like fights because girls are sexualized; girls like the fights because they can see a girl they do not like get hurt; the way girls fight by slapping and hitting instead of fist fighting is seen as funny like slapstick.”

“Fighting...makes girls feel powerful because the person who wins feels better than the person who lost. They conquered over someone and the one who lost has nothing.”

“Being picked on lowers a girls self esteem a lot, especially if they lose the fight. They get hurt.”

“ I don’t know what girls get from fighting except fame. They fight mostly over boys, their friends, and just to be popular. There is one girl who everyone knows or likes and they want to compete for that spot.”

“Girls are like entertainment to me. Girl-on-girl violence is more entertaining to males. We like to see tits and ass. I’d rather see two girls fight than males. Thongs showing. Hair pulled out . Breasts exposed -things of that nature.”

Girls in Cook County Detention: What do they have to say about girl violence?

Wenona Thompson of Girl Talk, a recently ended weekly program for girls in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center, asked a group of over 20 girls recently in detention several questions regarding why girls are violent towards other girls. Some of the reasons that girls identified included cliques, gossiping and talking behind each other’s back, pettiness, need for attention, jealousy, anger, insecurity, wanting dominance, competition, to look powerful, teasing and calling each other names.

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Girls' descriptions of their relationships with other girls reflect much contention, pettiness, distrust, and competition. At the same time, girls also expressed the desire to be able to have more positive relationships with one another and identified ways that girls could avoid fighting and sabotaging other girls (including friendship and love).

Questions and sample responses:

Why do some girls feel they can't get along with other girls?

"Emotions. Girls have feelings. Hold grudges for a long time. Partners may like a girl which makes girlfriend not like that girl."

"Girls are followers. Phoney. Some girls talk about other girls behind their backs and scared to tell the truth when confronted."

"Girls lack attention; they criticize too much; another girl is a reflection of herself-girls feel insecure."

"They think that fighting is what they are supposed to do because they see others do it."

What are some reasons girls may feel the need to fight or sabotage another girl?

"To look big and bad. They need a reputation. Someone provoked them. Too jealous. Haters. Pettiness. Domestic Violence. Take what is not theirs, like boyfriend or girlfriend."

"Some girls are immature; they have mental illnesses; they need attention."

"Envy, disrespect, they think that they are better than others."

"They call other girls out their names. Nothing else to do; household problems; stereotypes."

What are some things a girl can do to make you angry annoyed or sad?

"Talk behind my back. Call me up by my name. Annoying characteristics. She's irritating. Some females think that they are better than me."

"Confrontation; loud talking; they talk about my family; they are always in other's business; they talk about backgrounds; they violate trust; a lot of misjudgement."

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What are some things girls can do or need in order to avoid fighting or sabotaging another girl?

'Need friendship or love.'

"They need to learn how to ignore ignorance; they need to try to talk it out with a girl; interact with other girls."

"Stay to yourself; stay focused on positive; mind our own business."

"Control over anger; think; talk to people ; laugh at them; walk away; don't say nothing."

"Stay away from negativity; tell someone; look at them."

"Pray; tell a story; let others know it is not cool."

"Stay motivated; play sports; be mature; try soothing methods; ride it out; give yourself cool-out time; go shopping"

"Try to engage girls in positive activities; girls want to work with each other and have relationships with one another."

THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA ON GIRL-ON-GIRL VIOLENCE

Speakers testified that contemporary media images and messages about aggressive girls, and violence in general, play a salient role in several dimensions related to the complex issue of girls' aggression towards other girls. First, the media in the United States has created an increasingly violent society which, to a large extent, has normalized aggression. Second, media images of girls such as "bad girls gone wild" do not accurately reflect how most girls are behaving and instead lead to misperceptions and the myth of a so-called epidemic of girl-on-girl violence. Lastly, the media has sensationalized the increase of violence towards and by girls.

Dr. Laurie Schaffner from the University of Illinois at Chicago's Department of Criminal Justice noted that contemporary news reports and academic studies tend to produce three images of girls related to the supposed epidemic of girl violence: 1.) Girls as hapless victims of sexism, racism, and poverty with no choices; 2.) Girls as calculated and rational killers devoid of decent morals; and 3.) Girls as out of control, overemotional, vicious and hysterical or 'mean girls.' Dr. Schaffner asserted that these images oversimplify and distort what is actually occurring in girls' lives and that criminologists have repeatedly found that there is, in fact, no epidemic of girl-on-girl violence. Instead, the propagation of these sensationalized media images serves to popularize the myth of an epidemic.

Furthermore, Dr. Schaffner related that the media perceptions of girls and phrases such as 'girl-on-girl' fighting - as if it were a fact of life - reflect the increasingly violent United States culture. In a nationwide survey of high school students, almost one-fifth had carried a weapon in the last month and over one-third had been in a physical fight during the last year. Our culture has normalized violence, and media representations of girls fighting more and getting arrested for assaults reflects one way that popular culture has normalized aggression.

According to Ms. Kathleen Monahan of the Circuit Court of Cook County's domestic violence unit, which sponsors a teen dating violence program throughout high schools in Cook County, the significant increase and intensification of violence against and by young women is a function of violence in the media and its impact on girls and young women. She states that since 1996, with the introduction of the teen dating violence program, there has been a significant increase with respect to violence to and by young women: physical, emotional and sexual abuse, aggression, anger, and poor impulse control are all intensifying. In 1996, there were no alternative schools for violent girls and no apparent need; in 2005, several school districts are struggling with the need and availability of alternative schools for violent girls who must be excluded from their home schools for the safety of both others and themselves.

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Television programs and commercials, billboards, music videos, and film bombard the public with over 2500 images daily and portray women and girls as sex objects. Young girls are portrayed in increasingly provocative clothing and women and girls are used as a disproportionate number of victims of increasingly horrific crimes. Popular songs are laden with misogynist hate-filled lyrics. Ms. Monahan stated that, "In ad after ad, for products ranging from toothpaste to lingerie, women are seen as sex objects. The focus is on parts of the woman, our supposed need of men for fulfillment, our inability to understand technology and our willingness, as women, to do anything for jewelry. Women are seen as objects, something, not someone, to be used for other's pleasure. Young women accept these images as true."

The girl researchers from Girl World concluded that because they found so many examples of girl-on-girl violence in movies, songs, advertisements, talk shows and over 25,000 web pages the media DOES promote girl-on-girl violence. They claim that movies such as Mean Girls, Undercover Brother, Charlie's Angels and Girl Fight depict girls fighting in sexual clothes and positions. Videos such as Brook Valentine's Girl Fight show girls fighting over men. Talk shows such as Jerry Springer display women as sexual objects with no minds of their own. Advertisements often depict women fighting over shoes, purses, cell phones, clothes, and beer. These cumulative images impact how girls behave and how they feel about themselves.

GIRL VIOLENCE IN CONTEXT: THE SOCIAL FACTORS THAT DRIVE AND SUSTAIN GIRL VIOLENCE

Adult perceptions

According to Dr. Laurie Schaffner, research regarding girl's aggressive behavior reveals a complex set of factors driven by the maxim *violence against girls provokes girls' violence*. Behavior that has been termed girl-on-girl violence is more of a reflection of the changing images and meanings projected onto girls' behavior than changes in how girls behave.

The alleged rise of girl-on-girl violence is really a reflection of a cultural shift in perceptions of police, judges, and probation officers. Young women have always been involved in physical fights but girls have not been so thoroughly characterized by that behavior as they are now. For example, police arrive at the scenes of violence at homes and in schools and bring girls into detention; judges look at their cases and adjudicate for aggressive offenses; probation officers' discretionary assessments include framing young women as more aggressive than in previous times. While there are a small number of violent perpetrators whose behavior must be taken seriously and resources need to be moved on their behalf, to broadly characterize young women as violent misses the point.

Dr. Schaffner reported that nationally, of all persons under the age of 18 arrested in 2003, girls constituted 18% of arrests for crimes in what the FBI calls the 'violent crime index:' murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Between 1980 and 2003, girls' arrest rate for simple assault increased 269%. There were over 14,000 arrests of girls for aggravated assault in 2003, and girls accounted for almost one-third of arrests for simple assaults in 2003. Although the numbers indicated that arrests and adjudication for violent offenses among girls have risen in the past decade, Dr. Schaffner argues that this increase is largely a result of discretionary powers that adults employ to characterize behavior as violent.

According to Leslie Kennedy, the director of the Chicago Girls Coalition, a coalition that includes the Girl's Best Friend Foundation, the Stains Family Foundation, and the Young Women's Action Team, violence needs to be differentiated from girls asserting their rights or being angry about what happens to them.

Aggression is different from violence; aggression is not inherently problematic. "It is okay for girls to be angry and they need to have places to practice channeling that anger in useful ways. Sometimes young women speaking up for themselves or talking loudly is seen as aggressive or violent and we don't think that's accurate."

Social factors and conditions

Dr. Schaffner also argued that the perceived rise of girl-on-girl violence is really a rise of adult-on-girl violence and identified several social structures/conditions which promote girls' involvement in violence including poverty, unemployment, unsafe and unaffordable housing, under-funded schools, misogynistic and racist cultural images of girls and women, the degradation of neighborhood solidarity and dislocation due to gentrification and the construction of more prisons and detention centers. She reports that court-involved girls are trying figure out how to survive and navigate their childhood and adolescence around violence, sexism, racism and poverty. These social problems and girls' adaptation to these oppressive circumstances are inappropriately criminalized.

According to Dr. Schaffner's research, ten percent of women entered juvenile correction homeless. Without adequate housing, performance at school and work suffer. Young women from impoverished families have fewer alternatives. Additionally, poor girls of color are more likely to be vulnerable to predation by local idle older men, are more likely to lack access to resources to heal from trauma that occurred earlier in life and less likely to be protected by the law. Overall, in 2000, 5.6 million American children were living in severely distressed neighborhoods, an 18 % increase from 1990, despite a booming economy. Seventeen percent of the U.S. population below the age of 18 lives in poverty. Thirty-three percent of black children live in poverty.

Reframing the problem

As such, Dr. Schaffner argued that the lens should not be on the individual girl, her psychology, her behavior or types of girls; but on the context of girls' whole experience which hold important cues relating to girls' troubles. The problem of girl-on-girl violence should be reframed from an individual focus to the systemic, cultural roots of racism, misogyny, and violence against girls and their mothers which animates girls' aggression.

According to Leslie Kennedy, director for the Chicago Girls Coalition, " we cannot separate individual acts of violence from the systemic context in which girls experience a great deal of violence from men and others in their day to day lives." As such, girls need opportunities and spaces that encourage them to collaborate with and speak to one another, instead of competing with each other.

Childhood victimization

There is a strong established link between childhood victimization and later juvenile offending. Some studies now estimate that over 90% of girls in the juvenile legal system have histories of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, as compared to the 7% of girls in general. According to a study conducted by the American Correctional Association of Girls in Juvenile Correctional Facilities, 61% percent of girls had been physically abused and 54% had been sexually abused. Abused and neglected girls are nearly twice as likely to be arrested as other juveniles. Children exposed to multiple forms of family violence report more than twice the rate of youth violence as those from non-violent families.

In a nationwide study of adult women in criminal justice system, almost 68% of incarcerated women report being violently victimized as young girls. Fifty-three percent of young women reported being physically or sexually injured directly while 71% said that they had witnessed their parents or other combination of family members engaged in violence. Girls reflect and reproduce the violence that victimizes them; a disproportionate number of girls come into the juvenile system from family histories of physical and sexual violence and emotional neglect.

Furthermore, according to a study by the Harvard School of Public Health, 82% of girls suffering depression committed crimes against persons as opposed to 40%-42% of all girls in their study. Like men, young women may express depression as aggression and a 'righteous rage' that can be linked to sexual injury and other abuse.

EMPOWERING GIRLS THROUGH GIRL FOCUSED PROGRAMMING

Speakers agreed that effective interventions should be gender-focused, and should include opportunities for girls to build healthy relationships, promote girl empowerment by teaching girls to make better choices, build the self-esteem of girls, and provide a physical space and program content which takes into account the physical and emotional safety of girls.

Girls are relational

Earnest Jamison of GIRLS LINK, a coalition that works to improve the lives of girls involved in or at risk of being involved in the Cook County Juvenile Justice System, stated that it is important to recognize that the relational, personal dynamic is critical to understanding the motivation of girls' violence as well as how service providers should relate to girls. Girls are in need of supportive and empowering connections with other girls, women, and other important members of their communities; girls develop within these empowering connections. The lack of mentors and role models that teach girls how to be each other's allies can contribute to aggression and violence between girls.

Girls pose unique needs to service providers and the juvenile justice system

Boys and girls are socialized differently, and service providers should be aware of this difference. Common social experiences for girls with problems with aggression include a history of sexual abuse and victimization, fleeing abuse at home and becoming runaways and prostitutes which often introduce them to the criminal justice system through these status offenses, abuse by their intimate partners, depression, and teen pregnancy. Service providers and actors in the juvenile justice system should be gender-responsive and address the needs of girls including emotional and physical safety, connection, and need for empowerment. Programming should foster empowering connections between girls, women and other important members of their communities.

Examples of gender-responsive programming

Melissa Spooner described Project RENEW-Empowering Girls on Probation, a program within the Cook County Juvenile Probation Department. RENEW stands for Reclaiming, Empowering, Nurturing, and Embracing our Womanhood. Project RENEW recognizes the need to have girls on probation for as short a time as possible and prepares girls to return to their communities by helping them recognize the resources that are available to them and providing ties to their communities. It also gives girls the opportunity to get to know other girls and understand what it is like to be in someone else's shoes. The program provides girls with a separate and safe, comfortable physical space when they come in to see probation officers, helps foster the relationship between the girl and her probation

officer, and gives girls opportunities to be in a variety of groups (journalling, art, health) with other girls where they can learn skills and how to get along with other girls their age with the proper coaching and modeling from adults, mentors, and group leaders.

In Cook County, 4,152 males are on probation and 788 girls are on probation (October 2005). Project RENEW serves 248 of these girls. Most clients are 15-16 years of age and have been placed on probation for aggravated battery or domestic battery. Girls' backgrounds typically include being marginal students, sexual abuse, medicating themselves with marijuana use, running away from the problems that they have at home, transient living in general, and pregnancy. Seventy-five percent of girls on probation had exposure to violence and 57% admit to assaulting others in the past.

Anna Greanias Wright, Coordinator of Special Programs and Events at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, works with girls as part of her job responsibilities and is helping to implement several gender-responsive programs by partnering with outside community entities. In partnership with the Girls Scouts of America, Girl Scout Troop 791 is the first troop of its kind to be in a detention center and offers girls recreational opportunities, such as "camping out" on the center's yard, as well as the opportunity to learn about basic personal finance and how to recognize and seek help for dating violence. Ms. Wright also partners with several other outside community programs to offer girls journalling, yoga/meditation, film festivals, mask making and story telling.

Noelle Soyka of the Girl Scouts of Chicago reported the Girls Scouts offer girls much more than just camping. The Girls Scouts offers girls safe places to be with other girls and focus on violence prevention, conflict resolution, self-esteem, and leadership. Their programs offer a range of skills-building opportunities, including lessons in safety, how to manage teasing, including how to say "no", leadership experience, skill building in conflict resolution and team work.

Message to schools

Schools, including administrators, teachers, and parents, need to take girl-on-girl violence seriously and identify resources to create more after-school opportunities for young women that give them leadership and employment skills. Additionally, schools need to start providing workshops on the causes and prevention of violence. Schools should adopt gender equitable teaching strategies, select textbooks and curricular materials free of sexual and racial stereotyping, eliminate sexual harassment and provide an atmosphere in which girls can feel comfortable achieving and excelling. It would be useful to solicit help from parents, youth groups and community leaders when implementing ideas that promote girls' achievements and to include girls in this dialogue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission recognizes that addressing girls' violence requires a broad response from government, community based organizations, the private sector, funders, families and schools. The recommendations contained in this report are intentionally limited to actions that can be taken by Cook County government. These recommendations are specific and achievable.

- 1) The Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center ("JTDC") should institutionalize gender-responsive programming and policies which take into account the distinct needs of girls, including their physical and emotional safety. In the short-term:
 - The JTDC should expand the very limited resources currently allocated to the development and implementation of gender-responsive policies and programs. These resources should include trained and dedicated programming staff as well as funding to support the programs. There is currently one staff person with no budget doing all the non-athletic programming for boys and girls.
 - Support the formation of an advisory committee on the implementation of gender-responsive programs and policies at the JTDC. Working in partnership with the Commission on Women's Issues and the Sheriff's Department of Women's Justice Services, the JTDC has taken preliminary steps to organize such a committee of advisors from government agencies, community-based organizations and academia. These initial efforts should be continued and have the support of senior management at the JTDC.
 - Training on gender responsiveness in the criminal justice system, similar to training developed by the Sheriff's Department of Women's Services, should be mandatory and ongoing for all JTDC staff. Such training will prepare staff to understand and work more effectively with girls in detention.

- 2) The County should study long-term solutions for girls involved in the juvenile justice system including separate facilities and comprehensive services much like those which are offered to women through the Cook County Sheriff's Department of Women's Justice Services. The Sheriff's Department of Women's Justice Services uses a gender-responsive integrated model which can serve as an example for best practices for establishing a gender-responsive system for juvenile girls.

- 3) The County should expand Project RENEW to serve all girls on probation throughout all of the County's police districts. As of May 2006, 232 of the 728 girls on probation are in Project RENEW which prepares girls to return to their communities by helping them recognize the resources that are available to them and providing ties to their communities. Project RENEW is an excellent example of gender-responsive programming which should be expanded to serve all girls on probation.

- 4) The County should provide support for the development and maintenance of a GIRLS LINK website. This website would serve as a centralized source of links to many resources and tools geared towards serving girls involved in or at-risk for being involved in the juvenile justice system. Resources available include gender-responsive training material and program guidelines, a gender-responsive risk assessment instrument which helps identify girls at risk for re-offending, and a program self-assessment tool for agencies to assess their ability to make a difference for girls.

- 5) The County should support programs that successfully connect girls in the juvenile justice system with community-based resources, including health and mental health services. A model gender-responsive, community-based case management program was developed by GIRLS LINK and piloted through the non-profit organization Metropolitan Family Services in 1998. The program has been funded by the Cook County Board of Commissioners since that time at a current annual budget of \$135,000. The case management program serves girls aged 10 to 16 who are petitioned through the court from two of Chicago's police districts, Districts 8 and 9, and who score high or moderate on a risk assessment for re-offending. Once referred into the program, girls are assigned a single case manager who provides brief supportive counseling, school advocacy, and linkages to critical resources in her community.

The case management program and model needs a comprehensive outcome evaluation to determine its efficacy, to assess its strengths and to identify areas that need improvement such as increasing its referral base. The outcome data should then inform a decision about whether the program needs modification, should be replicated and/or whether alternative programs should be developed.

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- 6) County departments and agencies, including the County's Bureau of Health Services, the Bureau of Public Safety and Judicial Coordination, the President's Office on Employment and Training, and the Office of the Chief Judge should seek funding opportunities, including grants, for programs that address the needs of girls at risk for violent behavior, provide alternatives to incarceration for girls and meet the unique needs of girls in the criminal justice system. These programs should include community based gender-responsive programs which give young women safe places to develop anti-violence strategies and conflict resolution skills, and which provide them with an array of social and educational services.