

Introduction

Girls in the juvenile justice system are an understudied population.^{1,2} In the last two decades, there has been a dramatic increase in girls served by the system³⁻⁵; currently girls account for nearly 30% of juvenile arrests in the U.S.⁴

This increased presence is attributed to elevated physical and mental health problems, lower school achievement, substance abuse, family dynamics, and recurrent delinquency.^{1,6-7}

Girls formally involved in the juvenile justice system are more likely than their male counterparts to report direct trauma and victimization, including sexual and physical abuse, mental health issues, and fragmented families.⁶⁻¹¹ These factors may lead to substance abuse as a coping mechanism in girls.¹¹

Delinquent girls are being diagnosed with more than one mental health disorder,^{8,10-13} and with having more issues with substance abuse compared to delinquent boys.^{1,6-8}

The purpose of this paper is to further examine gender-based differences among youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

Methods

Findings are from the National Cross-Site Evaluation of Juvenile Drug Courts & Reclaiming Futures (JDC/RF), an evaluation of 8 JDCs across the U.S. implementing JDC/RF. Adolescent clients of the JDC/RF programs completed the Global Appraisal of Individual Needs (GAIN-I) Initial Assessment¹⁴ survey at intake. The GAIN-I is a standardized clinical assessment tool.

Independent sample t-tests were used to examine differences between girls and boys involved in the 8 JDC/RF programs.

Results

Out of 769 adolescents enrolled in the selected JDC/RF programs, **76.3%** were boys and **23.7%** were girls. A larger percentage of the girls were between 11-14 years of age (**14.8%**) compared to boys (**9.5%**). **91%** of the boys were 15-18 years of age, compared to **85%** of the girls. There was a statistically significant difference in racial/ethnic distribution between girls and boys.

Girls experienced higher rates (72%) of drug dependence than boys (61%).*

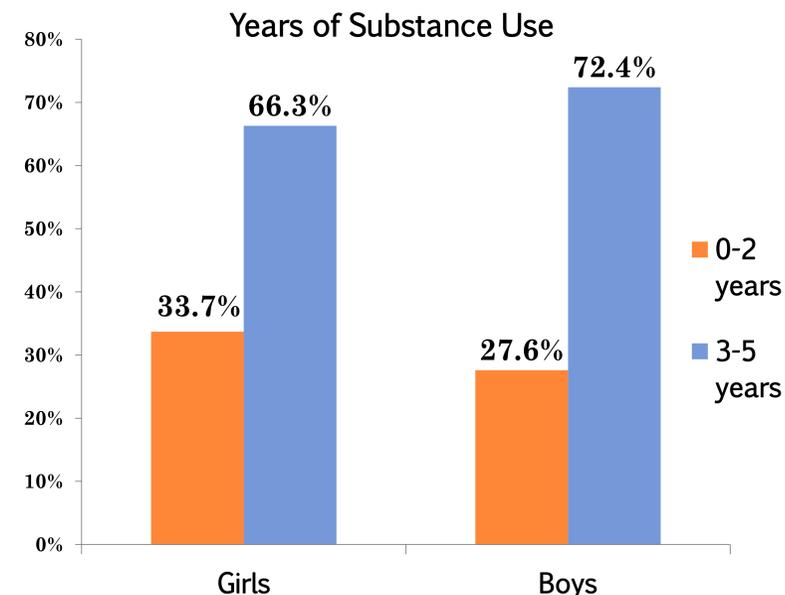
Girls were much more likely to have been homeless (65%) than boys (45%).*

Girls experienced higher rates of lifetime victimization (69%) than boys (59%).*

*statistically significant

Substance Use and Abuse	Girls	Boys	p
Drug dependence	72.1%	60.7%	.003
Any opioid use in the last 90 days	30.8%	18.3%	.001

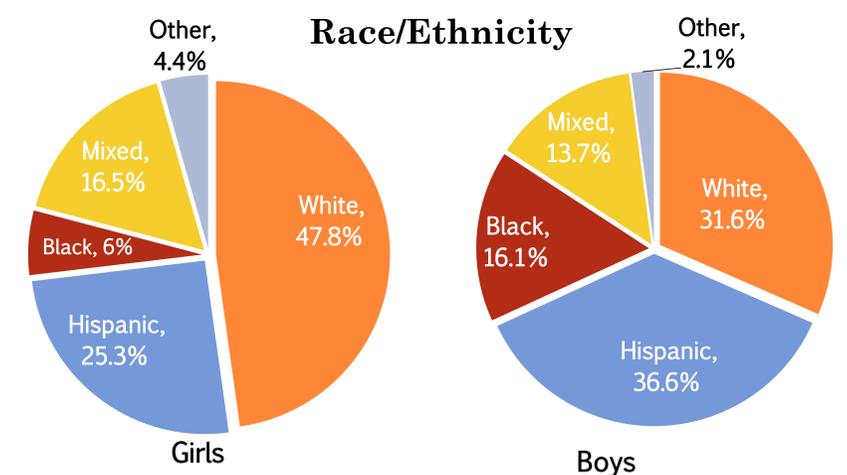
Consistent with current literature, girls experienced statistically significantly higher rates of drug dependence than boys. Girls also were found to be using more serious drugs like Opioids (including Heroin, Opiates, and Methadone) statistically significantly more often than boys.



A statistically greater proportion of girls had been using substances for 3-5 years compared to boys.

Trauma and Mental Health	Girls	Boys	p
Past year acts of physical violence	74.7%	67.9%	.071
Lifetime history of victimization	69.1%	59.3%	.015
Ever homeless/runaway	65.4%	44.9%	<.001
Experienced both internal & external mental health problems in the last year	65.4%	44.9%	<.001
Diagnosed with a mood disorder	50%	22.7%	<.001

Girls experienced higher rates of victimization, being homeless/runaway, internal/external mental health problems, and diagnosis of a mood disorder than boys.



Vocational Engagement/Justice Involvement	Girls	Boys	p
Currently vocationally engaged	90.0%	91.4%	.594
Behind 1 or more grades in school	48.4%	57.0%	.042
Expelled or dropped out of school	19.0%	19.1%	.983
In detention or jail last 90 days	31.5%	24.2%	<.001
On probation/parole last 90 days	62.4%	71.5%	<.001

There were no gender-based differences in vocational engagement. Girls were detained at a significantly higher rate than boys.

Conclusion

Some research¹⁵ suggests that many communities may avoid processing girls into the juvenile justice system except when it seems especially necessary. Consequently, girls who do enter the system may represent a more high-risk subpopulation.

Consistent with this idea, our findings indicate that girls experience higher rates of **drug dependence, opioid use, homelessness, victimization, mood disorders, and internal and external mental health problems** compared to boys. It is obvious that girls entering the JDC system are highly vulnerable individuals requiring an array of gender-appropriate services to deal with co-occurring disorders and integrated traumas. When gender-specific treatment programs & services are available, recidivism decreases.¹⁶ More research is necessary to discover the most effective ways to treat and rehabilitate at risk girls.

References

Please see handout for full list of references