

Understanding Aggression with Adolescent Girls:

Implications for Policy and Practice

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Abstract

Seventy at-risk, adolescent girls in seven residential facilities were interviewed over a 12-month period. The girls were asked questions regarding experiences, thoughts, and feelings about physical and verbal fights with friends and parents. Results showed that many of these girls reported different reasons for starting and escalating verbal and physical fights, they had more negative feelings for verbal fights than for physical fights, and had similar thought processes during both kinds of fights. More girls acknowledged responsibility for starting fights with parents than they did with peers. Implications of the results for treatment of female young offenders and the development of public policy are discussed.

UNDERSTANDING AGGRESSION WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Overview. The Young Offenders Act is yet again poised for substantial revisions. While the context for change this time is similar to previous revisions including the on-going debate about whether the juvenile justice system is tough enough, the one new ingredient is the concern for the escalating rate of adolescent girls being charged for violent offenses (Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunshot, Cunningham, & Saunders, in press). Although Dell and Boe (1997) indicated that there was no noticeable trend in violence statistics for adolescent girls, the data released by Statistics Canada in 1999 show a decrease for adolescent girls for all criminal charges, but an *increase* for violent charges for 1994-1998. However, boys commit three times as many violent crimes as girls. Some authors (Chesney-Lind & Shelden; Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999; Horowitz & Pottieger, 1991; Reitsma-Street, 1999) view this increase in charges for girls as resulting from bias in the youth justice process at both the arrest and adjudication stages with girls being arrested and charged for more minor offences than boys.

Whatever the causes for the charges for violent crime, it is necessary to address the needs of the increased number of girls in the justice system. In a recent release from the Department of Justice (2000), *AA Strategy for the Renewal of Youth Justice*, numerous specific concerns for Canadian youth justice were expressed including the need to ensure equity, fairness, and effectiveness for all young people. Regarding female young offenders the discussion paper suggested:

Because few young females are convicted of personal injury or significant property offences, few specialized programs have been developed for them *although* many young female offenders require programs to deal with prior sexual abuse and health related issues. (p. 4)

While also acknowledging the increasing rate of charges for violence amongst young women, this discussion paper identified the need to direct greater research efforts towards female young offenders. However, although the need to develop and coordinate appropriate services for adolescent girls is a

priority, the paucity of research to inform and direct efforts in this area is troubling. In contrast, in the United States the *Office for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention* (OJJDP) has acknowledged the absence of gender-sensitive information for programming and has initiated the generation of information about female young offenders as a basis for the development of appropriate policy and practice through numerous discussion papers with provocative titles such as: *What About Girls?* (1998); *Why are Girls' Needs Different?* (1998); and *National Efforts to Address the Needs of the Adolescent Female Offender* (1999). Canada's own National Crime Prevention Center in identifying the lack of knowledge in this area, has identified research on safety and girls involved in crime as a national priority (1999).

The current study is a step in developing an empirical basis for understanding aggression within a group of high-risk adolescent girls who reside in the residential and young offender system in one large Southwestern Ontario community. For the purposes of the study, violence is defined as physical aggression. Aggression is the broader term that includes physical, verbal, relational, and indirect forms. The term, fight, is used for conflicts that use either physical or verbal aggression.

Aggression and Adolescent Girls. Recently, Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunshot, Cunningham, and Saunders (2000) reviewed 46 research studies, published between 1991-1999, which contained data on aggression in adolescent girls. They made several conclusions from their review of these studies. Aggression by adolescent girls is not a unitary construct: it can be both physical and relational. However, adolescent girls appear to use verbal, indirect, or relational aggression (such as gossiping, arguing, name calling) more than physical aggression, especially when compared to boys (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukianen, 1992; Owens & MacMullin, 1995; Pakaslahti & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1998). These studies from Finland and Australia were the only studies to investigate relational aggression. One qualitative Canadian study (Artz, 1998) of six physically aggressive girls, though, did address the relational aspect of their physical fights. These girls reported that they staged their fights with other girls for the benefit of an audience of boys to improve their status with the boys. As well, the female victim was chosen because she needed to be taught a lesson for acting too cocky, going after the

aggressor's boyfriend, or being perceived as a slut. Much more information is needed about both verbal and physical aggression in adolescent girls to determine if the reasons given for fights by these six girls are representative of larger samples.

Similarly, very few studies (7) addressed cognitions related to aggression in adolescent girls. Of these studies, the strongest association was found for empathy and perspective taking being related to suppression of aggression (Chase, Treboux, O'Leary, & Strassberg, 1998). However, we need to know what girls are thinking while they are being aggressive because it may be possible to intervene at the level of cognitions. Do their thoughts differ for physical aggression compared to verbal aggression? What specific thoughts help them to suppress aggression?

Family variables have also been associated with aggression in adolescent girls. Such things as parental aggression (Bjorkqvist & Osterman, 1992), negative communication styles by parents (Heaven 1994; Pakaslahti, Spoof, Asplum-Peltola, Keitikangas-Jarvinen, 1998), parental rejection (Viemero, 1996), and low parental support (Saner & Ellickson, 1996) were all related to aggression in adolescent girls. The results from research relating childhood neglect/abuse and aggression were mixed, with two studies (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & Neidig, 1995; Watts & Ellis, 1996) reporting a significant relationship between the two variables, and two studies (Jasper, Smith, & Bailey, 1998; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998) reporting no significant relationship. There are many other aspects of families, however, that need to be understood in relation to aggression by adolescent girls. For example, are patterns for girls' fights with parents similar to fights with their peers? Do the precipitating factors differ for fights with parents compared to fights with peers?

One of the problems with research on aggression in adolescent girls is that the majority of data comes from samples of both males and females. Thus, there is the potential for aggression in these studies to be conceptualized and assessed in ways that are more appropriate for males. For example, Henning-Stout (1998) performed an item analysis of currently used standardized measures and found that the majority of items did not reflect the experiences and behaviours that the social-psychological literature (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Way, 1995) describe as being salient for adolescent girls, such

as relationship issues. Because there are no standardized measures of relational aggression, the few studies that investigated it, assessed it by using single-item, peer-nominations of classmates who exhibited relational aggression. However, single items do not have the stability of standardized measures.

For these reasons, the methodology chosen for the current study was qualitative. Qualitative research is appropriate for understanding a phenomenon in depth. Much of the previous research on aggression in girls has focussed on the correlates of aggression or on differences between males and females. This type of research does not provide information about the *why* of the aggression, about the accompanying thought patterns of the perpetrators, or about nuances that differentiate physical from verbal aggression. Qualitative methods are ideal for these types of issues. One Canadian qualitative study on violent adolescent girls (Artz, 1998) which provided a helpful beginning point for the current study used only six girls with intensive interviews over time of them and others in their lives. The current study was designed to improve on the Artz (1998) study by using a larger sample of 70 girls.

The conceptual framework for the study was systemic. Hawkins (1998) asserts that to understand aggression it is not enough to examine only individual factors because “violent behavior is the result of the interaction of contextual, individual and situational factors” (p. 146). In accord with this belief, the current study examined the perceptions of the individual girls, as well as the contextual and situational factors of their conflicts within significant relationships with peers and their conflicts with parents. More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions in a sample of at-risk adolescent girls: (a) what are the differences between verbal and physical fights with peers with respect to causes, thoughts and feelings during the fight, escalators, and location? (b) what factors prevent girls from engaging in fights with peers? and (c) what are the causes and patterns of fights with parents? The last goal of examining fights with parents was included in the study to determine if fighting patterns were similar within families and with friends. At-risk adolescent girls were chosen for the sample because it was believed that they were more likely to have had experiences with aggression than a more general sample of girls.

Method

Participants

The participants were 70 volunteer adolescent girls, aged 12-19 years, ($M = 15.6$) from seven residential facilities (custody and group homes) in Southwestern Ontario. The majority were Euro-Canadian (56), with 14 ethnic minority girls (e.g., First Nations, African-Canadian, Arabic). Reasons for referral to the facilities included court-ordered (custody) and pregnancy, family breakdown, order to reside for the group homes. The girls were referred to the research project by agency staff and there were no exclusion criteria. Fifty girls had previous criminal charges (e.g., assault, theft, failure to comply) with the first charge occurring at a mean age of 13.5, and 63 had friends who had at least one criminal charge. Only 24 girls had an assault charge. They reported many disruptions in their lives, such as attending a large number of schools (range 3-40, $M = 7.89$), moving many times ($M = 9.7$), suspensions from school ($M = 3.65$), family disruption (61 had parental separation, 42 had introduction of a stepparent, 39 left home, 7 had death of parent), and 51 (73%) had a history of some type of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, and/or witnessing parental abuse).

The Interview

A 40-item, structured interview format was developed by the research team based on variables that have been found to be associated with aggression in adolescent girls in previous research. This interview format was pilot tested with a small sample of girls. Wording was adjusted and some new questions were added before the interview was used with the total sample. Some questions were short answer format (yes or no) such as, "Have any of your friends been in trouble with the law?" Some probes elicited longer answers such as, "Pick the worst physical fight you were in and tell me what started it." The four sections of the interview dealt with Peers and Friends, Physical and Verbal Fights, Family, and School. The questions were read to the adolescent girls by a research assistant who then

recorded their answers manually. Categories were developed for answers to all of the qualitative questions by the first author and one of the research assistants. All of the answers were then coded by two research assistants into 3-5 categories for each question. Interrater agreement for the coding of answers ranged from 75-89% with disagreements in coding being resolved through consensus discussion. Response categories in the Results section are presented in order of frequency with the highest occurring category first and the lowest occurring category last.

Procedure

The participants were interviewed individually at the residential facilities by four female counselling graduate research assistants from Spring 1999 to Spring 2000. Research assistants went to the facilities several times a month and scheduled appointments with new residents who volunteered for the study. Using a standardized interview protocol of 40 questions, interviews lasted approximately one hour. The interviewers recorded the participants' answers on the standardized questionnaire. The research team of two counselling professors (two authors) and four interviewers met regularly to ensure standardization in the recording of interview data.

Results

Physical Aggression with Peers

Participants were first asked how they would describe violence so that their answers to other questions could be viewed in the context of how *they* defined violence. Less than half of the girls described violence as only physical contact. In contrast, about half of the sample viewed violence as including other elements such as emotional, mental, or verbal violence, threatening, hurting, uncontrollable anger, putdowns, destruction of property, screaming, or swearing. When asked if it was okay for girls to use violence, the majority said no. The girls were then asked *when* it was okay to use violence and one third still said never, while another third said it was okay in self-defence. A smaller group gave other situations when it was okay to use violence, such as when they were angry, to revenge a friend getting beaten, or because someone slept with their boyfriend. These findings are summarized in

Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Fifty-three of the participants had been in at least one physical fight. About half of the girls reported that their fights occurred with other girls on a weekly or monthly basis and for about half the fights occurred yearly or less. They stated that these fights took place at school, at home, or at a variety of different places. When asked to describe what started their worst fight, all of the girls cited the behaviour of the other person. Half of the girls described physical action from another person such as, *Ashoving their butt in my face, and Aa girl punched me out.* For other girls, the fight started because of verbal reasons: e.g., being teased about their past, being called names (e.g., slut, dyke), being humiliated, or sticking up for someone else. Finally, another girl cheating with their boyfriend was the cause of the fight for four girls.

Feelings and thoughts during the physical fight were also probed. Forty-nine girls answered the question about their feelings during a physical fight and over half of them reported negative feelings of anger, hurt, fear, frustration, being out of control, with a few feeling remorse: *Alike shit, I had betrayed my morals and values.* Other girls felt confused or had mixed feelings: *Afelt good while I was doing it, but when I saw her next, I felt bad, and Aat the time, I wanted to punch her out. Now, I think it's stupid.* Only a few girls reported positive feelings such as, *Arelieved to release anger, and Aproud of myself, didn't care.* When asked about thoughts during the fight, many girls were not aware of their thoughts or could not remember their thoughts during the fight: *Amy mind was blank, and AI didn't have much time to think about it.* Those girls who could remember recalled thoughts of wanting to hurt the other person: *AI just wanted to kill her, Akick her ass, she deserved it.* A few girls, wondered about stopping the fight: *Awho's going to get hurt, should I stop? and AI knew that if I didn't end it, it would get worse.*

The cause of the fight escalating was also attributed to other people by the majority of the girls who answered this question, either because the other person fought back, name called, or because other people got involved: Aher other friend jumped in,@ and Aother kids taunting and counting the blows.@ A quarter of the girls admitted having a part in escalating the fight: AI got more and more angry as I thought about it,@ and Amostly me because I wanted to hurt her.@

Verbal Aggression with Peers

Almost all of the girls had been in at least one verbal fight which was more than they reported for physical fights. Half of the girls reported verbal fights occurring daily or weekly and half reported them occurring monthly or yearly. The number of girls who reported their worst verbal fight occurring at school was smaller than for the worst physical fight and more girls reported their worst verbal fight occurring at home than they did for the worst physical fight (some said verbal fights occurred on the telephone). Table 2 has frequencies of categories for these questions.

Insert Table 2 about here

The first two types of reasons given for starting verbal fights were different than the reasons given for physical fights. The most common reason from almost half of the girls was a disagreement: Ajust disagreeing on stuff,@ and A misunderstandings, he said/she said.@ For others, the reasons described threats to friendships: Astuff that wasn't true that would break relationships up,@ and Athey do something to make you mad like break secrets, say something behind your back.@ Finally, for some girls the cause was teasing or name calling, the only category to overlap with reasons for physical fights.

More girls reported negative feelings with verbal fighting than with physical fighting. Their negative feelings about verbal fighting included descriptions of being upset, scared, guilty, weird, sad, angry, regret, stupid, useless. A few girls reported positive feelings including: Anot proud, but it's OK if stuff gets resolved,@ and AI feel better when I can get my word across.@ For some girls, their thoughts

during the verbal fight were negative about the other person: *'What a bitch, I want revenge.'* In contrast, other girls had helpful thoughts such as, *'If it gets out of control, I will just leave.'* However, many girls had no awareness or memory of their thoughts: *'I don't talk to myself during fights - usually concerned with winning the fight.'* These thought processes were very similar in category and frequency to the thoughts for physical fights.

In contrast to physical fights, few girls used the behaviour of others as the reason for the escalation of verbal fights. When other people were discussed, they included the fighting opponent (*'If they yell and put me down'*), as well as bystanders (*'Another opponent jumping into the fight'*), and in one case, an adult (*'Interference of staff/parents/workers'*). Almost half of the girls acknowledged either actions of both parties (*'If at first I or they don't want to work it out'*) or their own actions (*'Usually my temper'*).

Most of the girls had at least one instance of being tempted to fight with peers and reported what stopped them from fighting. Many stopped because of outside intervention (*'A bystander said he'd phone the cops'*) or because they did not want the consequences of fighting (*'I knew I would get suspended, and I didn't want to go to jail'*). A few girls gave evidence of more proactive reasoning: *'I took control and walked away, and because I didn't think she was bad and fighting doesn't solve anything.'* A smaller number of girls did not fight because they stated they did not like fighting or did not feel like fighting. In other words, their reasons were based on feelings rather than on a cognitive justification. Only two of the girls stopped themselves because the other person was their friend.

Verbal and Physical Aggression with Parents

As can be seen from Table 3, when these adolescent girls had arguments with their parents, they most frequently used verbal aggression such as yelling and calling each other names. A smaller number used physical aggression such as throwing things at the parent or away from the parent, hitting their parent, or being hit by their parent. Many of the girls listed using both verbal and physical aggression. Others used avoidance techniques such as going to their room, walking away, or going to someone else's house. A smaller number used other nonaggressive approaches, often avoidance combined with

talking: Afirst avoid by walking away and then talk about it.@

Insert Table 3 about here

In contrast to describing what started physical and verbal fights with peers, when the girls discussed arguments with their parents, the majority of responses described either self behaviour or behaviour from both self and parent as the cause of fights. Self-behaviour responses included things that the adolescent had done to precipitate the fight, such as fighting with a sibling, calling a sibling names, not going to school, not being home enough, staying out too late, coming home stoned, not doing what parents asked of them, or being mouthy. Joint-behaviour responses usually acknowledged that either the parent or adolescent could start the fight: Awhen someone is not listening or bringing up a subject someone didn't like,@ and Anot doing enough chores, when my parents are stressed, when my dad=s sick, when both are stressed.@ Other girls attributed fights to more general phenomenon such as Astupid things,@ or Asomeone=s bad mood.@ Only a few girls blamed the parent for the arguments: Amy mom being drunk and acting stupid, being unreasonable,@ and Amy mom is rude and inconsiderate.@

Discussion

The adolescent girls living in residential facilities in this study were fairly aggressive with 75% of them participating in at least one physical fight with peers and a third of them fighting on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. In comparison, in a study of a general high school sample of 114 adolescent girls (Traher & Leschied, 2000), only 12.3% reported being in a physical fight. While the majority of girls in the current study thought that it was not okay for girls to use violence in general, the majority also thought that violence was justified in self-defence or for other reasons. This type of reasoning was evident in that all of their responses about what started their physical fights could be construed as self-defence by the participant. Similarly, the majority of them believed that other people caused their fights to escalate. This finding is consistent with research by Shields and Whitehall (1994) who found that their

sample of male and female young offenders, had scores indicating significantly less self-responsibility for violent acts compared to nonoffending high school students. It is interesting that the girls in the current study described their fights in ways that indicated that likely both parties in fights are convinced that neither one started nor escalated the fights.

When the content of the reasons given by these girls for fighting is considered, there appears to be a drive to preserving self-integrity and status with their peers (for example, being *Agoaded* by others). With these girls having an average of eight different schools in ten years of schooling, they likely would have been more vulnerable and less confident in their status with peers because of frequently finding themselves as the *Aoutsider*. These findings are similar to Artz's (1998) study of six aggressive girls. Her participants also stated that they were against violence because it was *Astupid*. However, they felt compelled to fight when another girl had stepped out of line or broken the unwritten rules of conduct, and thus, needed to be *Ataught a lesson* with a physical beating. These reasons for fighting differed slightly from the current study, likely because the current sample was representative of at-risk girls who were not as violent as the Artz sample. However, both groups viewed the other person as the cause of fights.

With verbal fights, although some girls credited other people for the fights, the largest number of girls stated that the fights were about disagreements which implied joint responsibility for starting the fight. In contrast to physical fights, though, one-third of the sample gave friendship reasons for their fights. Combining this finding with the majority of them reporting using verbal fighting on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis with peers, provides some support for studies from Finland (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992; Pakaslahti & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 1998) and Australia (Owens & MacMullin, 1995) where adolescent girls used verbal and relational aggression more often than physical aggression. In contrast to physical fights, less than half of the girls credited others for the escalation of the fight. Many girls described either joint or self-responsibility for the escalation.

When fights with parents were considered, the majority of the participants acknowledged either self-behaviour or joint behaviour causing arguments. Thus, there is an interesting continuum of reasons

given for fighting: all of the girls viewing physical fights with peers as being caused by others, almost half of the girls implying verbal fights with peers were caused jointly, and more than half of the girls stating arguments with parents were caused by self or jointly. It may be that arguing with parents is more acceptable for adolescents, and hence, they are more willing to reveal some part in the argument. It also may be that because these girls were not living at home that they romanticized arguments with parents, while fights with peers were currently occurring. The reasons for verbal fights with parents and peers were also quite similar in that the most common reasons for both were disagreements. The arguments with parents had the added element of power struggles in the disagreements about chores, hours, school, etc.

In addition to the girls' reasoning about the start and escalation of fights, the results also provided information on what their thoughts were during fights. Their thoughts were quite similar for both physical and verbal fights with about a third of them focussed on negative thoughts of wanting to hurt the other person. This type of thinking is indicative of these girls accepting a power-over model of interacting with others. Miller (1991) believes that a power-over model of interaction is more typical of men and that women more often use a power-with model which allows for greater mutuality and equality within interactions. It could be helpful to provide these girls with information and skills of how to interact from a power-with position.

Only a quarter of the girls had thoughts about stopping the fight. However, more girls reported negative feelings with verbal fights than with physical fights, both for the whole sample and for the group who had experience with both physical and verbal fights. It may be that because the girls did not think that they caused their physical fights that there was less reason to have negative feelings about them.

Finally, when these girls were tempted to fight with peers but did not fight, many were stopped by outside intervention (e.g., staff stepping in) or knowledge of external consequences. Only a third of them reported using more proactive reasoning such as walking away from the situation or telling themselves that fighting would not solve anything. Although it is helpful to know that some fights are stopped by staff, bystanders, or teachers, it is likely that proactive thoughts will be more helpful in

violence prevention work with adolescents because it is important that they obtain the necessary skills to do their own violence prevention work.

Implications

These findings on the thought processes of at-risk adolescent girls about verbal and physical aggression must be viewed in the context of a sample that had histories of much family disruption including abuse. Hawkins (1998) believes that violent behaviour is the result of a multitude of interactional factors. Although the current study provides no information on causation of aggression, Hawkins draws to our attention the necessity of considering prevention interventions that are multicomponent to address the many contributing factors of aggressive behaviour. For example, while this study focused on the cognitions of these girls, intervening at the level of cognitions without addressing any underlying trauma in the girls' lives is likely to be shortsighted and ineffective.

Although we do not know much about aggression in adolescent girls, we know even less about effective aggression prevention interventions that are tailored to the needs and experiences of girls. Because Artz's (1998) sample also had abuse histories, she recommends that any aggression prevention program for adolescent girls include an abuse recovery component. Healing underlying trauma has the potential for reducing some of the anger and hurt that may be fuelling the aggressive behaviour. This kind of treatment could also address issues of self-integrity and vulnerability that are often associated with adolescents who experience ongoing disruption in their lives from many changes in family situations and many different schools.

At the same time, it seems important for the adolescent girls in the current study to be provided with other behavioural and cognitive strategies for dealing with conflict with their peers. Knowing what situations cause their fights is a good entry point for role playing common situations to provide them with behavioural practice of more prosocial options. Knowing what escalates their fights provides opportunities to substitute their current unhelpful reactive self-talk with more helpful proactive self-talk. For example, instead of saying to themselves, *I'm going to smash that bitch,* they can practice substituting, *Calm down, this isn't worth fighting about.* In addition, only a quarter of the girls indicated

being aware the consequences of their actions before or during their fights. Helping them to anticipate consequences of different actions seems to be another appropriate component of preventative treatment. Hollin (1990) recommends teaching adolescents how to identify problems, generate alternatives, understand the social context of the problem, and then choose an appropriate response that is contextually relevant. Of course, many of the poor conflict-resolution skills used by these girls were learned in their families. Thus, it is important to provide parent-child conflict resolution groups for these girls, so that the entire family system is receiving more helpful skills for negotiating and managing conflict (Leschied & Cunningham, in press).

It would be most helpful if these treatment programs were gender-specific because some of the situations which prompt girls to fight are different from boys (e.g., inaccurate gossip, sexual slurs) and are likely exacerbated by a culture that imposes gendered expectations about their sexuality, in particular. As Artz (1998) speculates, girls are not fighting over boys as much as they are fighting each other because of the significance given to girls', but not boys', sexuality. Therefore, these girls could benefit from group work in relationship building with other girls, because Pepler and Craig (1999) hypothesize that girls= aggression occurs within relationships as a result of the investment they put into their close friendships. As well, providing them with a feminist analysis of the socialization of girls in this culture would also be helpful to increase their awareness of detrimental messages they receive (e.g., self-worth from having a boyfriend, a thin body, being sexy) (Basow & Rubin, 1999). In a similar vein, Reitsma-Street and Artz (2000) recommend differential intervention for girls because they believe that crimes committed by girls are not only a function of their established interactions, but are also part of their struggles to find a place within a culture that has unequal privileges and distribution of resources for girls compared to boys. Therefore, they recommend differential intervention with an equal emphasis on three components: (a) social, emotional, and cognitive capacities of youth; (b) resources and messages of the youths= environments (e.g., familial, societal, etc.); and (c) struggles and interactions of youth within the supports and constraints of these environments.

Significance for Policy and Legislative Revision. While the debate will no doubt continue

regarding the reasons behind the increase in aggression by adolescent girls, undoubtedly, children's services and juvenile justice systems will be called upon to provide service to an ever-increasing number of girls with violence and victimisation in their histories. This study has touched on some of the common themes reported in a group of girls who were involved in the children's service delivery system. What is apparent is that their needs are complex and multi-dimensional, often reflecting the cognitions and behaviour consistent with youths whose experiences with violence have been considerable. In the present group, this experience frequently included, exposure to violence in their families of origin as well as being directly involved with violence both as a victim and a perpetrator. Perhaps more than most youth in the justice system, policy and practices will have to encourage greater cooperation among the child welfare, children's mental health, and justice systems in order to effectively address the diverse needs of this group.

Issues in understanding the assessment and treatment needs of aggressive adolescent girls could very well become the next major challenge to service providers in Canada's justice system. Diverse methods of inquiry are needed in this area to better inform policy makers and legislators if we are to increase our responsiveness and sensitivity to these young women. As in other countries, Canada is facing a challenge of increasing numbers of young women in its youth justice system. Although data from the current study is important in its own right, the authors would also like it to be a call to action to other researchers and practitioners to increase our knowledge in order to provide greater sensitivity and effectiveness in treatment and service delivery to young women. A national forum is needed to bring our collective knowledge together to provide a coordinated policy for aggressive adolescent female offenders. The current revisions to the YOA make it timely to address the needs of adolescent girls in the youth justice system in Canada.

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Table 1

Frequency of Categories for Questions about Violence and Physical Fights

| | | |
|--|--------------------------------|----|
| How would you describe violence? ($n = 69$) | Physical contact only | 31 |
| | Combination of physical, other | 38 |
| Is it OK for girls to use violence? ($n = 69$) | No | 42 |
| | Yes | 27 |
| When is it OK to use violence? ($n = 69$) | Never | 25 |
| | In self-defense | 25 |
| | Other than self-defense | 19 |
| Frequency of physical fights ($n = 53$) | Daily | 1 |
| | Weekly | 11 |
| | Monthly | 11 |
| | Yearly or less | 26 |
| Location of physical fights ($n = 46$) | School | 16 |
| | Home | 6 |
| | Elsewhere or combination | 24 |
| What started your worst fight? ($n = 53$) | Started by another person | 26 |
| | Teasing, name calling | 18 |
| | Over a boyfriend | 4 |
| Feelings during physical fight ($n = 49$) | Negative (e.g., angry, bad) | 30 |
| | Confused, mixed | 9 |
| | Positive feelings | 7 |
| | Did not care | 3 |
| Thoughts during physical fight ($n = 50$) | Wanting to hurt other person | 17 |
| | Questioning stopping, ending | 10 |
| | Defending self | 4 |
| | No memory of thoughts | 19 |
| What caused fight to escalate? ($n = 44$) | Other person fought back | 21 |

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Aggressive Adolescent Girls | 24 |
| Self reasons | 13 |
| Others joined fight | 10 |
| No memory or do not know | 17 |

Table 2

Frequency of Categories for Questions about Verbal Aggression

| | | |
|---|--|----|
| Frequency of verbal fights ($n = 65$) | Daily | 18 |
| | Weekly | 15 |
| | Monthly | 22 |
| | Yearly or less | 10 |
| Location of verbal fights ($n = 66$) | School | 13 |
| | Home | 17 |
| | Elsewhere or combination | 36 |
| What started worst verbal fight? ($n = 64$) | Disagreement | 30 |
| | Friendship/Relationship Issues | 19 |
| | Teasing | 15 |
| Feelings during verbal fight ($n = 65$) | Negative feelings | 54 |
| | Positive feelings | 7 |
| | Nothing, do not know | 4 |
| Thoughts during verbal fight ($n = 64$) | Negative ideas of other person | 21 |
| | Helpful ideas re stopping fight | 16 |
| | No memory or did not care | 19 |
| | Negative thoughts about self | 8 |
| What caused fight to escalate? ($n = 60$) | Blamed other person's behavior | 28 |
| | Fault with both people | 19 |
| | Self responsibility | 6 |
| | Do not know/do not care | 6 |
| What stopped a fight when tempted? ($n=41$) | Outside intervention or knowledge of consequences | 18 |
| | Proactive self responses | 13 |
| | Dislike of fighting | 8 |
| | Friendship with other person | 2 |

Table 3

Frequency of Categories for Questions about Aggression with Parents

| | | |
|---|-------------------------------|----|
| What happens in fights with parents? (n=63) | Verbal aggression only | 23 |
| | Physical aggression | 17 |
| | Avoidance | 14 |
| | Other nonaggressive methods | 9 |
| What starts fights with parents? (n = 65) | Self behaviour | 26 |
| | Behaviour of both parent/self | 14 |
| | General attributions | 14 |
| | Parent's behaviour | 11 |