Principles in Practice: A Multistate Study of Gender-Responsive Reforms in the Juvenile Justice System

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Abstract
There is currently widespread interest in gender-responsive programming within the juvenile justice system. The research literature currently provides critical information about the needs of girls and pathways into the justice system through epidemiology or program evaluation studies; however, the experience of practitioners implementing reforms is less represented. This perspective is essential given the nascent stage of research on gender-specific best practices and the widespread adoption of gender-specific principles. In this article, the authors review the policy and research literature relevant to the gender-responsive movement and present the results of their multistate study of how principles are being translated into practice, including how reforms are being initiated and sustained. They discuss these findings in light of their implications for practice and research.

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Keywords
female, gender responsive, juvenile justice, continuum, practice based

Introduction

Federal mandates, policy recommendations, and practical realities at the local level are all contributing to an increased focus on gender-responsive programming in the juvenile justice system. Multiple centers and groups across the country are entirely devoted to advancing best practices for justice-involved girls; in addition, biopsychosocial and criminology researchers are focusing in a greater degree on girls’ delinquency. Although gaps exist in the research regarding the effectiveness of specific programs for girls, there is no shortage of information available for a state or county juvenile justice agency to begin implementing gender-responsive reforms. Our experience, however, as an advocacy group attempting to construct our own recommendations for Washington State (Justice for Girls Coalition of Washington State), was that information about gender-responsive principles are not currently organized in a way that provides clear guidance for moving a system forward. In contrast, the sheer number of “gender-responsive” principles being advocated in policy and research venues can make it difficult to know where to begin and what to prioritize in the process. For example, we counted at least 35 distinct gender-responsive principles put forward in a sampling of various academic and policy publications (Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Adolescent Female Advocacy Network [AFAN], 2008; Cooney, Small, & O’Connor, 2008; Covington & Bloom, 2006; Hubbard & Matthews, 2008; National Center on Crime and Delinquency, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Although the research literature provides a great deal of information regarding the risks, needs, and pathways of justice-involved girls, information regarding how jurisdictions are translating these findings and principles into actual practice is lacking. Products from the gender-responsive movement tend to focus on practice areas, principles, and guidelines that identify overarching themes but do not tie these principles to specific practices or policies (see Bloom, Owen, Deschenes, & Rosenbaum, 2002, for a review of state and national efforts). Furthermore, challenges in the funding and sustainability of girl-specific programming have made it difficult to identify which girl-specific practices improve on current practice for harm and/or recidivism reduction (Hubbard & Matthews, 2008). Given the nascent stage of this research area, we adopted a practice-based approach to assess what practices and principles tend to be common among those juvenile justice programs
nationwide purporting to be gender responsive. A literature review, online surveys, and site visits guided the development of a framework we are currently using to recommend reform efforts in Washington State. This article presents the results from our coalition’s study of how gender-responsive principles are being translated into practice from selected sites around the country as well as our efforts to translate these principles within a continuum-based framework that encompasses practices from arrest through parole.

**Gender-Responsive Policies**

It is well documented and often cited that the proportion of girls in the juvenile justice system is increasing. From 1983 to 2008, the proportion of girls involved in the juvenile justice system increased from 21% to 30% (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 1996, 2009). Although girls are still much less likely to be system involved as a group, this change represents an 80% increase in arrests from the early 1980s, compared with a much smaller 4% increase for male offenders (OJJDP, 2009). Because this increase is largely understood to be due to changes in sentencing practices (Chesney-Lind & Okamoto, 2001; Feld, 2009; Hubbard & Matthews, 2008; Steffensmeier, Schwartz, & Zhong, 2005), this increase has prompted policy, research, and funding activities for girl-specific services that emphasize potential system bias as well as an understanding of the developmental differences between boys and girls. For example, the OJJDP has specifically provided funding for gender-specific services since 1996 (Budnick & Shields-Fletcher, 1998). Furthermore, the 1992 reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act introduced an amendment that requires all states applying for federal formula dollars to examine their systems for potential gender bias and provide appropriate services for females. The amendment specifically mentions health and mental health services, treatment for physical and sexual assault/abuse, self-defense, and education. In the United National Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (Beijing Rules, 1985), Rule 26.4 states that “Young female offenders placed in an institution deserve special attention as to their personal needs and problems.” In addition, the public correctional policy on adult and female offender services from the American Correctional Association states that “correctional systems must practice gender responsiveness in the development of services and programs for adult and juvenile female offenders.” The American Bar Association and National Bar Association published a review of gender bias in the juvenile system in 2001 and called for greater equity in treatment (American Bar Association and National Bar Association, 2001). Furthermore,
a number of states have convened committees or task forces to address gender-specific services and have implemented policies and programs based on gender-responsive principles.

Although the dominant theory implicit in many of the current lists of gender-responsive principles draws from Gilligan’s relational approach to female development (Gilligan, 1982), the burgeoning research literature in this area continues to grapple with the precise differences between genders in risk and protective factors, criminal trajectories, and effectiveness of services.

**Gender Differences Research**

The research literature on gender differences suggests that specialized approaches to treatment, such as those mentioned above, are warranted given differences in boys’ and girls’ developmental experiences that influence and are influenced by temperament, role expectations, personality traits, cognitive processes, moral reasoning, and trauma (Bolla, Eldreth, Matochik, & Cadet, 2004; Gilligan, 1982; Gullone, Hughes, King, & Tonge, 2010). Meta-analyses of sex differences have shown small and moderate trends for females to display more inhibitory control (Else-Quest, Hyde, Goldsmith, & Van Hulle, 2006), self-reported nurturing and emotional personality traits (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001; Feingold, 1994), a care orientation in moral reasoning (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000), lower self-esteem in adolescence (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999), lower risk-taking behaviors (Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999), susceptibility to depression (Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994), and lower aggression (Knight, Fabes, & Higgins, 1996). Recent research points to the influence from prenatal androgen exposure on gender-stereotyped play among boys and girls (Auyeung et al., 2009) and differences are also affected by social context. For example, stereotype threat effects have been observed for females completing a math task in which females who were reminded of their gender during the task tended to perform less well (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). In addition, ethnicity is an important moderator of gender effects; for example, African American girls do not exhibit the same drop in self-esteem as Caucasian girls in adolescence (American Association of University Women, 1991) and may also be at greater risk of self-injurious behavior specifically due to family conflict (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Miller, 1994). The variation within gender is an important consideration when developing interventions for girls and serves to highlight the importance of individualized planning and treatment.

Epidemiological studies have tended to find more similarities than differences in the risk and protective factors that contribute to self-reported
delinquency, emphasizing the quantity rather than quality of risk that differentiates boys from girls (e.g., Fagan, Van Horn, Hawkins, & Arthur, 2007; Gorman-Smith & Loeber, 2005; Hartman, Turner, Daigle, Exum, & Cullen, 2008; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Rowe, Vazsonyi, & Flannery, 1995). Studies that focus on juvenile justice samples, however, have identified differences in the levels of risk and need that characterize gender groups. For example, multiple studies have found that justice-involved girls are adjudicated for less serious offenses (Feld, 2009) and have a higher rate of mental health need (Nordess et al., 2002; Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002; Veysey, 2003), higher rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from personal victimization (Abram et al., 2004; Cauffman, Feldman, Waterman, & Steiner, 1998; Steiner, Garcia, & Mathews, 1997; Wood, Foy, Goguen, Pynoos, & James, 2002), and lower self-esteem (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006).

The feminist pathways literature on girls’ offending also highlights the link between early victimization or trauma and justice involvement (see McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2008, for a review). A study by Cauffman et al. (1998) estimated that up to 60% of girls in a high-security facility had been previously raped or nearly raped; furthermore, approximately 60% of these girls had experienced PTSD symptoms in the past, and nearly 50% are currently experiencing PTSD symptoms. A detailed assessment of sexual victimization prevalence among adult women in custody reported a 50% rate of child sex abuse (McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2008). Furthermore, girls themselves draw a link between early victimization and subsequent offending (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Rodriguez, 1983). Taken together, the literature suggests that interventions designed for the prevention of delinquency based on the epidemiological literature should potentially focus on similar factors for both genders (Fagan et al., 2007); however, when addressing a justice population, interventions need to be sensitive to differences in these groups, particularly in regard to the probability of previous trauma due to sexual abuse.

Identifying “Best Practice”

Although there is widespread recognition that female juvenile offenders require unique programs and policies, several factors have impeded the identification and implementation of evidence-based gender responsive programs or practices in juvenile justice settings. One challenge is program sustainability, given the relatively small number of girls in the system and government pressures to address economy of scale issues. This has also had a direct
effect on the ability to identify and test promising programs to establish programs for girls that are clearly evidence based (Zahn et al., 2010). The OJJDP Girls Study Group, for example, did not find a single program among a review of 65 that qualified for more than a “promising” status based solely on study design issues.

While sometimes used to criticize the evidence-based practice agenda, the practice-based evidence approach can also be a complement to rigorous evaluation (Horn & Gassaway, 2007). Practice-based evidence asserts that innovative and effective treatments and practices will only be discovered in the laboratory of actual practice. The knowledge and wisdom of practitioners should guide program development and quality improvement. After identification, these practice-based themes can then be subject to more usual modes of research-based validation. As a step toward identifying best practice themes in the area of gender-responsive care, we solicited examples of practices across the justice continuum. The examples highlighted below represent a sampling of practices that are self-consciously gender responsive; these are organized according to common themes, are further explored in the context of site visits that examine the context surrounding reform, and then discussed in the light of corresponding research.

**Method**

**Procedures and Sample**

To identify individuals around the country with knowledge of state and local gender-responsive practice, an email with a weblink to the study was sent through a national juvenile justice listserv. The email requested that the survey be sent to anyone who could comment on gender-responsive programming in his or her state. Thirteen respondents from 10 states completed the web survey. The respondents included individuals from juvenile justice settings at the state and county level, as well as two nonprofit organizations serving justice-involved girls through contracted residential placement. Apart from one probation officer, respondents were management- and supervisory-level staff. Information regarding job position and state affiliation is not reported here to preserve confidentiality. From responses received on this survey, and through previous knowledge on model states in this area, four sites were then selected for in-person visits: Santa Cruz, California; Bexar County, Texas; Jacksonville, Florida; and Salt Lake City, Utah. From the site visits and survey, 10 states are represented in the study, including Colorado, Texas, West Virginia, Utah, Florida, Illinois, California, Tennessee, Ohio, and Washington State.
In-person visits were conducted by the second author on the project and involved an average of 2 days of interviews, tours of facilities, and shadowing. The in-person visits particularly focused on how reforms were initiated, funded, and sustained.

**Materials**

The online survey was developed by our coalition to assess how the agency or facility translated girl-specific policies into practice, including procedures regarding screening and assessment, detention or probation practices, training, and cultural and socioeconomic diversity. Only open-ended questions from the survey were used for this study and included the following: “Please list specific detention or probation practices your site specifically uses to address girls’ needs.” “Please list specific detention or probation training your site uses to address girls’ needs.” “What would you consider to be best practice when screening and assessing girls in the juvenile justice system?” “To what extent are interventions you provide matched to girls’ patterns of offending?” “Does the socioeconomic demographics of the girls you serve impact where you offer your program? If so, how?” The survey took approximately 30 min to complete.

**Results**

Responses to the open-ended questions on the survey were analyzed for themes using a qualitative approach to analysis (Polkinghorne, 2005). In the following we review the responses to the survey in light of these themes, offering examples of how we derived these themes from descriptions of actual practices.

**Screening and Assessment Practices**

In our survey, most of the respondents, from across the continuum, commented on the importance of individualized assessment and the connection between assessment and treatment planning. Given the potentially higher rates of trauma, abuse, and trafficking among girls, screening for these issues in particular was cited as important for gender-responsive practice. A respondent working in probation outlined an “ideal” screening procedure in which every girl would first receive a mental health or trauma screen that would include an assessment of whether the girl had been a victim of sex trafficking. Scoring above a threshold would result in a referral for an in-depth
assessment that would include information on the youth’s strengths and difficulties and incorporate input from collateral sources such as parents and schools. This assessment would be used to develop a treatment plan that outlined the youth and family’s strengths and treatment needs and other support resources, and recommended psychosocial treatment. In addition to this assessment, a risk assessment would also be completed to determine whether the youth could remain in the community.

Echoing the theme of assessing for natural supports, a respondent from a private, girls-only, long-term residential facility in West Virginia reported that assessments at their facility are conducted at entry and at discharge, with a focus on identifying natural, community supports for transition planning at discharge. Issues regarding the process of screening or assessment were also mentioned. A respondent from a corrections facility in Colorado reported that interviews with girls are completed in a semiprivate area because of the sensitive nature of the screening items. This practice overlaps with safety practices as noted below.

Engagement

Respondents from correctional and probation agencies cited the importance of practices that make it easier for girls and families to participate in treatment. Although the practices used to engage girls are not necessarily gender specific, as they are elements of good, general practice, we include them as a theme because of their importance. For probation, noted engagement practices included being mindful of where services (e.g., girls groups) are being held and when they are being held to increase access. In Santa Cruz, California, probation treatment services are provided in three geographic areas so that girls have a close to home option. In addition, probation officers reported that they either transport girls themselves or make sure services are timed to coincide with bus schedules to encourage participation. At the corrections level, facilities that are close to the girls’ home are more accessible to families and encourage family involvement. A respondent from a corrections facility in Colorado reported that it is policy to place girls at the closest facility to their home when possible.

Relational Approach

Respondents explicitly referred to the need for relational approaches in staff training curricula as well as in developing interventions for the girls themselves. In a female-only residential center in West Virginia, policies are
specifically informed by an understanding that “girls function optimally when allowed to maintain their current relationships (safely) while building new supportive relationships.” Accordingly, supervision with staff focuses on developing skills to build relationships with the girls. Girls at the facility are provided groups and educational materials about healthy relationships, attachment and bonding with their own children, identifying violence and abuse, and building resources for safety and assertiveness in themselves and in their communities. The curriculum for girls and staff are primarily developed in house. Similarly, staff members at correctional facilities in Colorado receive training on female relational aggression and gender differences. Girls in these facilities are offered a healthy relationship, healthy sexuality, body image, and economic literacy intervention through Girls Inc. of Metro Denver.

In Washington, a number of probation departments implement Girls Circle or a similar girls’ support group and report that a primary goal for the groups is to help girls establish trusting and supportive relationships with other girls, and increase their awareness of what comprises a healthy relationship. Furthermore, the state’s Juvenile Rehabilitation Administration (JRA) pioneered the application of Dr. Marsha Linehan’s Dialectical Behavior Therapy as a milieu, group skills, and individual therapy treatment with adolescent girls. Dialectical Behavior Therapy focuses on emotion regulation, interpersonal effectiveness, and mindfulness (Linehan & Dimeff, 2001). The program, because of its success in the girls’ facility, has since expanded across all institutions.

Safety

Safety was mentioned as a key element of practice by respondents from long-term residential facilities and detention sites. In Tennessee, eight juvenile courts and the State Department of Children’s Services came together to fund an observation and assessment center that girls with minor offenses are referred to in lieu of detention. This gives girls an opportunity to receive in-depth assessment and services in a therapeutic milieu in an effort to divert these girls from deeper end justice involvement. This and other prevention or early intervention residential centers included in the study had strict no-takedown policies that limited allowable physical contact between the staff and girls. In early and deeper end residential placements (e.g., corrections), respondents reported that staffs are trained in crisis prevention and intervention. In West Virginia, residential staffs are also trained in motivational interviewing to help girls gain control of themselves, using physical intervention as a last resort. Mechanical and medical restraints and seclusion are all prohibited. In Spokane, Washington, girls are single bunked in compliance with the Prison
Rape Elimination Act and all infractions are reviewed by the detention manager to ensure that staff members are following policy to use communication skills rather than physical interventions.

In coed facilities, respondents who had the means reported that they house girls in separate units. Respondents without these means reported that privacy was maintained with velcro curtains over doors and staff are trained to be sensitive to privacy (emotional safety) while ensuring physical safety. As noted above, in the Colorado Division of Youth Corrections, it is policy to provide a girl a semiprivate area to be questioned by a female mental health staff for intake.

**Skills-Based, Strengths-Based Approach**

This principle encompasses practices that aim to build confidence as well as competencies to facilitate success in and outside of the system. Many of the programs reviewed in our study had an explicit or implicit assumption that system-involved girls, in general, are in situations in which they feel powerless whether through poverty, abuse, or chaotic households. Respondents to our survey cited the importance of emphasizing strengths and youth voice along all points in the justice continuum. In Utah, girls in correctional facilities develop their own treatment plans with personal short- and long-term goals that are compiled in hand-decorated binders. In the West Virginia facility, girls are included in treatment planning, are immediately given information about phone calls and visits, and are introduced to key members of the staff. In Washington State, all probation counselors are trained in motivational interviewing that emphasizes youth and family-directed treatment goals.

Educational programming was reported as key in multiple respondent sites. As one respondent noted, “Our educational programming is critical, with on and off grounds opportunities available . . . they are involved in opportunities to accomplish goals they’d never even conceived of in the past.” Educational needs were also mentioned as an important aspect of screening and assessment from respondents working at each phase of the continuum.

Residential facilities, both preadjudication/detention and corrections, noted the importance of providing girls with extra or personal toiletries and clothing to support hygiene as well as a sense of individuality. These included providing girls with more toiletries than are available to boys (needing more shampoo because of longer hair), allowing girls to wear their own clothes within a dress code, allowing girls to wear makeup, and allowing girls to decorate their living spaces. Another simple example of a strength-based policy in Colorado residential facilities is allowing girls to choose their
own recreational activities. In Colorado and Washington correctional facilities, policies support bonding between young mothers and their babies to encourage the girls’ development as an effective parent as well as the baby’s healthy emotional development. The Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care program in Washington offers the opportunity for a mother to have her child with her while still in residential care until she releases to parole or is discharged.

**Reentry and Community Connection**

A well-planned transition from any phase of the continuum back into the community was cited by multiple respondents as critical in facilitating a girl’s success. In Bexar, Texas, girls ordered into the correctional facility are assigned a specially trained probation counselor who works with the girl and her family through the residential stay and continues to work with the girl and her family upon release. In the West Virginia facility, the initial intake includes an assessment of needs (educational, mental health, relational, and so on) and a discharge plan in which the facility identifies needed services that staff members help to access on the girls’ behalf. Evidence-based treatments available through probation departments and the JRA in Washington State emphasize the ecological context of the girl’s functioning and identify natural supports to encourage systemic change in the girls’ home environment (Multisystemic Therapy, Family Functional Therapy).

On-site services can also address girls’ multifaceted needs and facilitate connections to ongoing sources of community support. Respondents reported having licensed mental health staff available to girls on an as-needed basis, educational supports geared to special needs, as well as substance-abuse and trauma treatment for girls in need of these services. A similar health and wellness format is offered through workshops in the King County Youth Juvenile Detention Center in Seattle, Washington, by Powerful Voices, a community-based nonprofit. Through these workshops, girls are introduced to trauma providers, legal advocates, and health care workers with whom they can connect in the community.

**Site Visit Case Studies**

Although the survey results in our study particularly informed our development of gender-responsive principles as translated into practice, we were also interested in the essential elements that bolstered the ability of these “model sites” to generate and sustain reforms. This information was
important for our goal to develop a model that could move an entire system forward in enacting gender-responsive practices. Accordingly, site visits were undertaken by the second author to better understand the factors that contributed to development and sustainability. Site visit interviews focused on how reforms were initiated, implemented, and sustained. For Texas and California, these apply at the county level, and for Washington, Utah, and Florida at the state level.

Crossroads Program, Bexar, Texas. In Bexar County, Texas, a juvenile court judge and district attorney noticed a growing number of first-time female offenders with high mental health needs entering the system. A shared vision to reverse this trend resulted in piloting the Crossroads program in Bexar County that has a population of more than 1.6 million people. “We look for girls in junior high who are accused of a low-level offense, but are at high risk to get in more trouble,” explained Judge Laura Parker. By pulling together representation from county mental health, probation, private residential placement, wrap-around service providers, and an evaluator, the juvenile court judge and lead prosecutor began exploring how to adapt a drug court model to the needs of first-time female offenders. The planning committee was funded by the federal OJJDP. After the planning period ended, Bexar County probation obtained a federal grant to hire an additional probation officer, and then redirected residential placement funding to launch the Crossroads program in 2008.

Program design. Before the Crossroads program, the county was sending more girls to residential placement, but these same girls had higher recidivism and probation violations than boys; in addition, Bexar County had one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the state. The planning committee used these data in program design. Crossroads, the pilot, gender-specific program that emerged is modeled after the Drug Court Program. The voluntary program served 12 participants who are assigned to the same probation counselor and are required to attend monthly Girl’s Court with their cohort. Wrap-around family support was provided by two different individuals. A case manager focused on skills training for parents and girls, deescalation, and community resources, whereas a family specialist addressed the basic needs of the family such as clothing, school supplies, and transportation. If necessary, girls could work intensively with a mental health therapist who identified underlying trauma issues. Support for school attendance, joining the Y, and attending a weekly all-girl empowerment group are also built into the program. Being a large county spread across many miles, the Crossroads program went to where the girls were, traveling to community sites on the outskirts of San Antonio and back again to the courthouse. The entire support
team met biweekly to discuss the girls’ cases and progress. The program was 9 months in duration and culminated with a graduation ceremony from Girl’s Court.

Looking forward. Preliminary evaluation results show very low rates of recidivism. The teen pregnancy rates, however, remain a concern. Despite budget constraints, the program continues to grow. More recently, the district attorney’s office added a new component to the program called Crossroads at the Y. Young offenders are now required to visit a YMCA a minimum of eight times a month to participate in group exercise programs and volunteer at community events. This additional program component was launched by the district attorney’s office using confiscated drug money.

GirlZpace program, Santa Cruz County, California. The Santa Cruz County California’s Girls Task Force, whose mission is to assess the needs of girls at risk of detention and develop prevention programs, was instrumental in launching reform efforts. Members on the task force included the Santa Cruz County Probation Department, Ceres Policy Research, Survivor’s Healing Center, Walnut Avenue Women’s Center, Conflict Resolution Center, and local community-based organizations. As a Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative model site, Santa Cruz probation and collaborators identified four waves of reform. These included reducing incarceration through use of a Risk Assessment Instrument, addressing disproportionate minority contact, assessing the needs of girls, and assessing the needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender youth. After an initial Girls’ Circle pilot at one site, Santa Cruz probation obtained Title II funding to hire dedicated probation officers with all-girl caseloads, expand to three sites, and provide additional services—including conflict resolution and trauma therapy—to specifically target issues underlying arrest.

Program design. Bookings for probation violations and assault charges due to family conflict were the data drivers for this program. Middle school truancy, runaways, and mother–daughter assault are specific examples. The GirlZpace program targeted low-level female offenders of age 12 to 14 by providing victim offender dialogue, parent–teen conflict resolution services, bilingual and bicultural girls-only probation officers and mentoring, and all-girl groups. Access to health insurance, substance-abuse treatment, and individual and family counseling to address childhood sexual trauma were also offered when necessary. The program served 80 girls each quarter and was noncourt ordered.

Looking forward. Despite very low recidivism rates, as reflected in lower probation violations and new offenses, the GirlzSpace program at the time of our visit was facing the end of Title II funding. Community partners were
actively seeking new funding sources from challenge grants and other federal and state sources.

**State of Utah Juvenile Justice Service (JJS).** In Utah, reform efforts were launched by the AFAN, which has worked to improve the juvenile justice system for females for more than 10 years. “Our goals are to increase awareness of the needs of female offenders, provide ongoing education to those who work with female offenders, and better the services that are available,” explained Nanon Talley, the state-employed female offender specialist and AFAN member. Funded through JJS, which is part of the Human Services Department, the female offender specialist ensures that gender responsive standards and programming are available at all facilities, including the detention centers, secure care centers, and community programs.

**Program design.** Utah was the only state among the site visits that employed a female offender specialist who advocates statewide for girls in the system. Although most of the state’s population lives near Salt Lake City, this specialist logged miles around the state providing training and consulting to staff working in observation and assessment, detention, and residential and correctional facilities. Trauma-informed care, developmental needs specific to girls, the role of families within the treatment process, and skills-based, strengths-based programming are standard training consistently offered to staff. Practices such as gender-responsive risk assessment, ensuring availability of female staff in specific circumstances such as bed checks and health care appointments, hiring staff who maintain a positive attitude toward girls, providing hand-decorated individual notebooks with treatment plan, and respecting girls’ hygiene needs were periodically monitored at all facilities. The program was designed to impact gender responsiveness across the continuum of a girl’s juvenile justice involvement.

**Looking forward.** Despite several years of state budget reductions, JJS continued to fund the female offender specialist position. In addition, AFAN recently hosted its 14th Annual Conference to convene juvenile justice professionals from around the state. Sessions included “Assessing Programs for Gender Responsiveness,” “Cliques, Crews and Catfights—Educating the Community,” “Female Responsive Juvenile Probation Practice,” “Can Cognitive–Behavioral Interventions Really Be Gender Sensitive?,” and “Adolescents Who Offend Sexually: Moving Towards Gender Specific Treatment.”

**PACE Center, Jacksonville, Florida Headquarters.** Early 1990s reform efforts in Florida led to creation of 17 PACE centers across the state. In Florida, a higher percentage of girls were being admitted to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice for less serious crimes and with less serious criminal histories than boys. The PACE Center used these data and the finding that
middle school failure—suspension, expulsion, or being held back—was the single largest predictor of subsequent arrests. “Close the door on her involvement in the system in the first place” was the program motto repeatedly mentioned by staff. Funded as a prevention line item in the state juvenile justice budget since 1998, the 17 centers are contracted as alternative schools.

**Program design.** Each center equally combined academic schooling with social service support for females of age 12 to 18. All girls had on-site counselors, academic advisors, and individualized education plans. Wall posters reminded girls of the core program values—honor the female spirit, invest in the future, seek excellence, and embrace growth and change, to name a few. “Is a girl ready, is PACE a fit” was how one staff member framed the critical role that intake and assessment played in forecasting overall program success. Along with ensuring readiness, the predictability of the program, structured expectations, a one-room school house approach, on-site therapeutic counseling, health education, and earning “levels” of responsibility were also foundational to what made the program effective. Program capacity for each site is 50 girls, and the school meets year round. While attending PACE, 91% of girls improved academically, 76% advanced a full grade, and 90% had no involvement in the juvenile justice system within a year of leaving PACE.

**Looking forward.** Despite sustained and crippling state budget cuts over the past 5 years, the state has successfully demonstrated the financial prudence of front-ending versus back-ending services. By quantifying the benefits of moving to front-end services like PACE, reform efforts stand a better chance of being sustained. PACE was acknowledged in 2008 by the Annie E. Casey Foundation as “the most effective program in the nation for keeping adolescent girls out of the juvenile justice system and a national model for reducing recidivism and improving school success, employment and self-sufficiency amongst girls.”

**Summary of Site Visits**

The site visits highlighted common strategies across counties or states to initiate and sustain reforms. With the exception of Florida, who’s PACE centers were first funded as a part of legal settlement, the main driver of reform in all the sites was a coalition of committed stakeholders. Data were then collected regarding needs, and programs were developed with the input of an advisory group that addressed this need. Florida and Utah secured state funding, but Texas and California began with grant funding. Texas has since redirected local residential funding to fund its diversion program. All of these efforts occurred in significantly different political climates. This demonstrates the power of
these common elements (coalition support, funding, data driven, and collaboration) to achieve reform despite political or economic barriers.

**Discussion**

While offering critical information about the pathways and needs of justice-involved girls, the research literature on gender-responsive programming to date has not sufficiently represented the experience of practitioners attempting to implement these reforms. As a coalition attempting to construct a model for gender-responsive reform in Washington State, we were primarily interested in what juvenile justice practitioners were actually doing, and why and how they were sustaining this work. This study summarizes the information we collected through an online survey and site visits. We combined this information with a review of the theoretical and research literature in this area and developed a set of core principles that, we feel, reflect a synthesis of research and practice. Our resulting continuum model provides a guide for how one might implement these principles across successive stages of the juvenile justice process from arraignment through reentry while emphasizing system continuity of care.

**Lessons from Practice**

Reforms in the sites studied in this article were driven by local data showing that girls had higher rates of mental health need, had high conflict with their families, and were generally charged with less-serious offenses than boys. These findings led some of the sites to focus on providing services as a diversion from justice involvement. The mission of the PACE centers to prevent justice system contact by providing services in a educational structure was also reflected in the Texas and California programs to divert girls from deeper system penetration by providing supportive community services. Another area of focus, exemplified by the female offender specialist position in Utah, examined how justice process and services, including residential services, were managing and treating girls appropriately. Similarly, responses to the online survey could also be split into practices (albeit overlapping) that are focused on preventing future offending through connection to effective services and those that are focused on the responsiveness of internal programs (e.g., court process, residential placement) to the needs of girls to increase motivation and decrease potential harm. Consequently, our study reveals what could be considered the dual purpose of the gender-responsive movement as
observed through actual practice: reduced system contact through effective services and ethical considerations for treatment and practice.

The site visits also highlighted the importance of local advocacy, a data-driven approach, and multisystem collaboration to achieve reforms. Sustainability continues to be a challenge as budgets tighten, but these approaches appear to have been successful in most sites in raising awareness and developing creative approaches to funding. Bexar County, for example, was able to redirect funds from residential programming to fund their diversion program for girls.

**Practice Themes and Research**

In addition, we observed a general alignment between the risks and needs identified for justice-involved girls in the research literature, and the focus of actual practices. This is unsurprising as there is likely a fair amount of cross-fertilization between these areas. Some of these areas of alignment include a relational focus among teenage girls that serves to place them at risk for coercive relationships and which can also be leveraged as strength. Accordingly, promoting healthy relationships for girls and emphasizing a relational focus among justice staff is often a key piece of gender-responsive care (e.g., Belknap, Holsinger, & Dunn, 1997).

Second, the small but stable differences between girls and boys, and differences among girls themselves, highlight the diversity found within gender groups as well as between groups; consequently, gender-responsive programming for girls recognizes and responds to the unique needs of individual girls and resist caricature or stereotyping. Third, the significant rates of child sexual abuse and trauma among justice-involved girls and women make this a priority issue. Knowledge and application of how past trauma influences subsequent offending practices and how the justice system can exacerbate trauma symptoms is critical to a “do no harm” mandate.

In addition, the study results emphasize the importance of safety, particularly in residential settings, as well as a strengths-based approach and the need to plan for reentry by providing immediate services for stabilization and identifying community supports for ongoing care. These themes align with the literature as well, namely, the strengths-based approach is increasingly recognized as a motivational tool to effectively overcome perceptual barriers to services (McKay & Bannon, 2004; Miller & Rolnick, 2002) as well as a clinical tool in treating an array of behavioral health issues (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005; Seligman et al., 2005). Given the drop in self-esteem for girls
in adolescence, a focus on strengths also passes the common sense test in promoting individual efficacy and self-worth.

Reentry is another growing area of focus in the field as greater awareness of the importance of ecological influences drives prevention, intervention, and reentry programming (Schoenwald, Brown, & Henggeler, 2000; Trupin, Kerns, Walker, DeRobertis, & Stewart, 2011). Again, given the influence of relationships on values and behavior, identifying these community supports may be particularly crucial for girls. Research demonstrates that even one positive friendship for a girl can act as a significant buffer from high-risk behaviors (Leve & Chamberlain, 2005).

**A Continuum of Care**

There is a growing emphasis in the gender-responsive literature on the “continuum of care,” which highlights the importance of maintaining consistency in services across levels of the justice system (Bloom et al., 2002). We used the lessons from the multistate study as well as the literature to develop a working continuum model that organizes gender-responsive principles across practice areas (see Figure 1). The levels of the continuum model, from Arrest through Parole, were selected as commonly recognized, major transition points in a criminal offender process. For the sake of parsimony, other possible pathways are not explicitly noted (e.g., truancy initiatives or specialty courts) but can likely be included within one of the broad levels of involvement.

The practice areas (screening/assessment, treatment/services, staff training, environment, transition) reflect our understanding of important activities that occur at each phase of the continuum; these were also reinforced by responses to our multistate survey in which respondents naturally commented on gender-responsive services in the context of these areas. Although we include some examples of practice in the continuum framework, the model is intended to act as a guide for planning and decision making so that someone working at one level of the continuum can reflect on whether programming at that level includes screening, treatment, training, positive environment, and transition activities and whether these activities align with gender-responsive principles. In addition, it is intended to spark conversation and thinking around how to develop continuity among services between continuum stages. This model is also a useful framework for developing a research program focused on studying the effectiveness of these practices at each level, keeping in mind the two goals of reform, that is, reducing system involvement and promoting safety.
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Limitations

This study is limited primarily by the relatively small representation of states and sites included in the analysis. As we had limited resources, we focused on sites that are particularly innovative in their responses to girls in the justice system; we did not do an exhaustive search of programs being done around the country. We have undoubtedly left out many exemplary practices that are focused on justice-involved girls. The current, preliminary work of the National Girls Institute, funded by the OJJDP, appears to be a promising beginning to providing additional practice-focused guidance to practitioners.

Conclusion

The gender-responsive practices highlighted in our multisite study largely focused on diverting girls from deep-end services and ensuring that internal services promoted safety. Interviews and site visits with practitioners in the field
revealed that adopting a relational frame for girls’ programming is common, as is a focus on holistic assessments, safety, engagement, and a focus on natural supports for reentry. Our study particularly adds to the literature by describing, through case studies, the process of initiating, developing, and sustaining practices for girls. In an environment of decreasing resources and increasing emphasis on economy of scale, programming for girls is at risk. Developing a coalition with a wide base of representation, using data-driven approaches to garner support, piloting programs with grants to demonstrate effectiveness, and redirecting funds were strategies used by sites in our study to achieve sustainability. With the lack of rigorous research identifying solid outcomes for current girl-specific programs, the field remains largely innovative at this stage; however, the similarities across sites in values and focus is powerful evidence that gender-responsive reform is a critical element of juvenile justice best practice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the members of the Justice for Girls Coalition of Washington State, an enthusiastic and committed group of champions for gender-responsive reform in the juvenile justice system. In addition, we would like to thank the respondents to our survey and for those professionals who were generous with their time and insight during site visits. Site visits were supported by the Washington State Partnership Council for Juvenile Justice and the Office of Juvenile Justice. Thanks also to Jacquelyn Hansen, MPH, for her research assistance and to two anonymous reviewers for helpful insights and suggestions on this manuscript.

Authors’ Note

The views represented in this article are the authors’ alone and do not necessarily represent the views of the authors’ employing institutions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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