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Stephen M. Gavazzi, Courtney M. Yarcheck and Meda Chesney-Lind  
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# GLOBAL RISK INDICATORS AND THE ROLE OF GENDER IN A JUVENILE DETENTION SAMPLE

STEPHEN M. GAVAZZI  
COURTNEY M. YARCHECK  
*The Ohio State University*

MEDA CHESNEY-LIND  
*University of Hawaii at Manoa*

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Growing evidence regarding the gender-specific nature of risk/needs factors in girls coming to the attention of the juvenile court is contrasted with the limited availability of gender-sensitive assessment instruments designed to measure risk/needs. In the present study, data are gathered from a sample of male and female youth assessed at a juvenile court detention facility. As hypothesized, analyses revealed significantly higher scores for males on prior offenses and significantly higher scores for females on family/parenting, mental health, traumatic events, and health-related risks. Unexpectedly, females also scored significantly higher than males in domains associated with psychopathy, accountability, and peer relationships. Female and male youth also differed in type of offense that brought them to the attention of the detention facility. In turn, type of offense was a predictor of risk/needs levels in the family/parenting domain, underscoring the particularly salient role family factors play in the lives of court-involved youth.

**Keywords:** risk assessment; juvenile; detention; gender

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Girls are entering the juvenile justice system more frequently and at younger ages than ever before (Poe-Yamagata & Butts, 1996). It is interesting that although there is growing evidence of the

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gender-specific nature of their risk/needs factors (Chandy, Blum, & Resnick, 1996; Salekin, Rogers, Ustad, & Sewell, 1998; Travis, 1999), most assessment efforts targeting these youth are nested within a male offender model, resulting in a literature that contains far less information about girls than boys.

Part of the reason for continued use of male-oriented models is that girls still represent a relatively small percentage of the overall juvenile justice population (Funk, 1999). In addition, it has been asserted that the same constructs predict delinquency for male and female offenders but at different exposure levels, which leads to differences in frequency (Smith & Paternoster, 1990; White & LaGrange, 1987). Also, there is a small body of work that has focused on the equivalent predictive abilities of the better known risk assessment instruments in male and female juvenile populations (Coulson, Ilacqua, Nutbrown, Giulekas, & Cudjoe, 1996; Jung & Rawana, 1999; Simourd & Andrews, 1994).

However, more recently, within the juvenile justice community, a "different needs" approach has been advanced because of increased attention regarding a range of gender-specific issues. For instance, girls are thought to be treated more harshly by the justice system (Federle, 2000). Also, the pathways that bring adolescents to delinquent behavior are thought to differ considerably by gender (Belknap, 2001; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 1998b).

Empirical efforts have provided direct and indirect support for these assertions. This includes research conducted by Chesney-Lind et al. (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Okamoto, 2001; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2003), who have focused on abuse in the home and the subsequent criminalization of survival reactions to those traumatic events. Related work includes that of Mazerolle (1998), who has argued that many gender differences are dependent on exposure to different types of negative life events, including those occurring in the context of the family. Similarly, it has been maintained that disruptions in the family differentially affect male and female offenders (Dornfield & Kruttschnitt, 1992).

This apparently conflicting evidence may be resolved through an examination of research by Funk (1999), who stated the following:

Because the percentage of female, compared to male, delinquents is relatively small, their risk factors carry less weight than those associated with the male population. Risk factors that are specifically linked to male reoffending subsume females' risk factors. This, of course, is no problem as long as the same factors place males and females at risk for reoffending. Yet, if they differ, the likelihood increases for a greater number of errors when classifying females. Moreover, females' specific risk factors remain hidden, thereby reducing some of the benefits directly associated with the use of risk assessment instruments. (p. 46)

Funk investigated differences in predictive models when using male-only, female-only, and combined samples. The combined and male-only models were markedly similar, having the same five significant predictors (financial hardship, poor school behavior, age at focus offense, placement in detention, and frequency of weighted prior offenses). They differed only in that the combined model had special education placement as a sixth predictor, whereas the male-only sample had poor peer groups as the sixth predictor. The female-only model was markedly different, however, having only one overlapping indicator (placement in detention) with the combined model and three unique factors (child abuse, runaway, and frequency of prior person offenses). Moreover, the use of the combined sample model with females accounted for only 17% of the variance, whereas the use of the female predictors accounted for 31% of the variance in the outcome variables.

#### ASSESSMENT OF COURT-INVOLVED YOUTH

Despite a recent trend toward criminalizing juvenile offenders, historically, the role of the juvenile justice system has been to focus on delinquency prevention and intervention (Lewis, 1999). In this regard, the use of well-developed assessment tools has been thought to provide the foundation for improvement of such efforts. Formal assessment procedures provide greater validity, structure, and consistency to risk classification and, in turn, increase the efficient allocation of limited resources by matching the most intensive and intrusive interventions to the youth with the greatest needs (Howell, 1995).

The large numbers of youth and families with which court personnel must interact, however, as well as ever-present time and fiscal pressures present a significant challenge to the early acquisition of the information needed to make effective decisions regarding placement and/or treatment. Also, although several local and state jurisdictions have developed risk assessment measures, the domains of inquiry vary appreciably from instrument to instrument. Furthermore, relatively little emphasis has been placed on the psychometric properties of these assessment tools in general and the more specific application to female-oriented issues.

In addition to the above-mentioned considerations, support for the development of a gender-sensitive risk/needs assessment instrument comes from a number of different theoretical and empirical efforts and covers a variety of gender-specific issues. For example, substance use is more highly correlated with delinquency for females than for males, and females score higher on instruments designed to measure psychopathy (Salekin et al., 1998). Also, females are more likely than males to suffer from internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety (Travis, 1999), and these internalizing behaviors more often than not co-occur with acting out (externalizing) behaviors in female delinquents. In addition, internalizing problems are especially pronounced for girls when they have been exposed to traumatic events, such as abuse (Chandy et al., 1996). Given the high incidence of abuse in the backgrounds of female delinquents (Acoca, 1998), taking such factors into account would seem to be of great importance.

Taken together, these findings strongly suggest that juvenile justice professionals need to examine the widest range of factors related to risk levels in the lives of female and male youth who encounter the court system. Recent empirical work has included the development of one such measure, the Global Risk Assessment Device (GRAD; Gavazzi, Slade, et al., 2003), that assesses potential threats to the numerous developmental needs of adolescents who come into contact with the juvenile justice system. This tool taps into 11 domains of risk/needs: prior offenses, family/parenting issues, deviant peer relationships, substance abuse, traumatic events, mental health issues, psychopathy, sexual activity and other health-related risks, leisure activities, accountability, and education/work issues

(the appendix provides examples of items measuring each of these domains).

Preliminary evidence suggests that the GRAD has excellent psychometric properties, including a solid factor structure and high internal reliability coefficients (Gavazzi, Slade et al., 2003). More recent studies have generated concurrent validity evidence with other well-established measures of risk/needs (Gavazzi & Lim, 2003), including the Family Events Checklist (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Kolbe & Collins, 1993), and the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis, 1993). Furthermore, some initial predictive validity evidence has been generated such that youth referred to more intensive services were able to be differentiated from youth referred to less intensive services as a function of GRAD scores (Gavazzi, Lim, Yarcheck, & Eyre, 2003).

The GRAD originally was built to match many of the same content areas contained within other assessment instruments used by juvenile justice professionals (Gavazzi, Slade et al., 2003). The original seven domains of the GRAD are comparable to domains contained within the Youth Level of Service Inventory (Shields & Simourd, 1991), for example. Also, GRAD items reflect content that is similar in scope to such measures as the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991), the Oregon Social Learning Center's Overt-Covert Aggression Questionnaire (Patterson, Crosby, & Vuchinich, 1992), and the Counter Control scale from the Rochester Youth Development Study (Krohn, Stern, Thornberry, & Jang, 1992).

At the same time, the GRAD was expanded to include more gender-sensitive issues, especially through the addition of domains associated with exposure to traumatic events and health-related risks (including sexual acting-out behavior). Concurrently, the original GRAD domains were augmented with supplementary items that reflected more female-specific manifestations of problem behavior. For example, items were added to the peer domain to tap into relational aggression, a term used to describe behaviors (e.g., gossiping and manipulation) that more often are associated with hostility displayed by females (Crick & Bigbee, 1998).

To date, however, no studies have considered the gender-sensitive nature of the GRAD. Therefore, the present study examined the use of the GRAD in the assessment of male and female adolescents who

come to the attention of the juvenile court. The main hypothesis of the current study was that there would be significant differences between the risk/needs scores of male and female youth. More specifically, it was hypothesized that males would display significantly higher scores than females in domains classically associated with delinquent males: prior offenses, peer networks, psychopathy, leisure activities, accountability, and education/work issues. In turn, it was hypothesized that females would display significantly higher scores than males in domains more typically associated with delinquent females: substance use, traumatic events, mental health issues, family/parenting issues, and health-related risks.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

Data were collected from 305 youth who were assessed in the detention facility of a large Midwestern county juvenile court. The average length of stay for youth at this detention facility was 14.5 days. The sample was 57% female ( $n = 175$ ) and 43% male ( $n = 130$ ), with an average age of 14.8 years ( $SD = 1.5$ ; range = 11 to 19). Seventy-one percent of the sample was African American, 21% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, and 4% biracial or other ethnicity. The predominant household composition was single-parent mother headed (56%), followed by married biologically intact parents (11%), grandparent headed (9%), stepfamily (7%), single-parent father headed (4%), and other (13%). Four main categories (incorrigible/unruly, domestic violence, property offense, and person-related offense) were constructed to record the reason for appearance at the detention facility. Court staff administering the GRAD used these categories to indicate the most serious charge being faced by the youth; in all, this included 133 incorrigible/unruly charges, 55 domestic violence offenses, 42 property offenses, and 75 person-related offenses.

### MEASURES

The data collection instrument used was the most recent, 132-item version of the GRAD (Gavazzi, Slade et al., 2003). The average time

that it takes to complete the GRAD is about 25 min. Respondents are asked to respond to the items by indicating on a scale of 0 to 2 (0 = *no/never*, 1 = *yes/a couple of times*, and 2 = *yes/a lot*) how much each item applies to their life. Item scores are totaled to compute a risk score for each domain.

## PROCEDURE

Six hours of training were completed by juvenile justice professionals prior to their participation in the data collection process. The youth in the present study were assessed by line staff working in the county's detention services department. Staff members were asked to conduct at least one assessment per week during a 3-month pilot of the assessment process. Sixteen professionals took part in the collection of data for this study. Each of these professionals had ongoing telephone contact with his or her GRAD trainers and face-to-face consultation with the detention center administrative officer as part of a quality control effort designed to ensure competence of administration.

## RESULTS

Initial analyses examined the possible existence of gender differences regarding the reasons for appearance at the detention facility. Significant differences were found ( $\chi^2 = 21.367$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), indicating that females were charged with more incorrigible/unruly (91 vs. 42) and domestic violence (36 vs. 19) offenses, whereas males were charged with more property (23 vs. 19) and person-related (46 vs. 29) offenses.

To determine the comparability of the groups, a 2 (gender)  $\times$  4 (offense type) MANOVA was computed with the GRAD domains as the dependent variables. The results revealed significant multivariate main effects (based on Wilks' lambda) for both gender,  $F(11, 287) = 6.04$ ,  $p < .0001$ , and offense type,  $F(33, 847) = 1.65$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Subsequent analyses were conducted to identify the source of the significant multivariate effects. First, risk scores for males and females on each of the 11 domains of the GRAD were compared



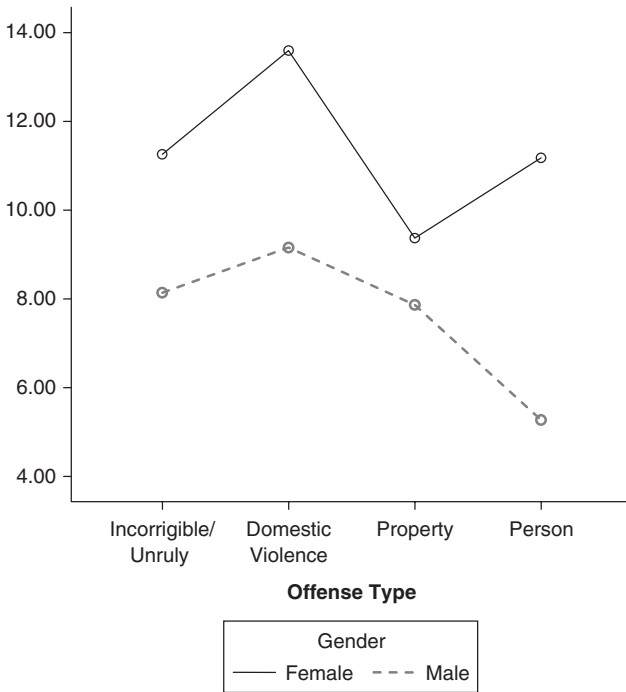
**TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations of GRAD Domain Scores by Gender**

GRAD Domain	Female		Male	
	M	SD	M	SD
Prior offenses	3.69	1.9	4.35	2.1
Family/parenting	11.51	5.5	7.23	6.0
Education/work	6.50	4.0	6.93	4.0
Peers	8.79	4.5	6.62	3.9
Substance use	4.35	3.9	3.70	3.6
Leisure activities	2.75	1.7	2.66	1.4
Mental health	17.27	11.9	11.97	8.5
Psychopathy	4.09	2.9	3.12	2.5
Accountability	4.46	2.9	3.49	2.5
Traumatic events	5.99	3.9	4.48	3.3
Health related	4.69	2.9	4.04	2.8

Note. GRAD = Global Risk Assessment Device.

through *t* test procedures. As expected, males scored significantly higher than females on the prior offenses domain,  $t(303) = 2.93$ ,  $p < .01$ , and females scored significantly higher than males on domains related to traumatic events,  $t(303) = 3.61$ ,  $p < .0001$ , mental health issues,  $t(303) = 5.22$ ,  $p < .0001$ , family/parenting issues,  $t(303) = 6.47$ ,  $p < .0001$ , and health-related risks,  $t(303) = 1.92$ ,  $p < .05$ . Unexpectedly, females also scored significantly higher than males on domains associated with peers,  $t(303) = 4.48$ ,  $p < .0001$ , psychopathy,  $t(303) = 3.12$ ,  $p < .01$ , and accountability,  $t(303) = 3.05$ ,  $p < .01$ . There were no significant differences between males and females on the domains of education/work issues, leisure time activities, and substance use. The means and standard deviations for male and female youth on each of the GRAD domains are found in Table 1.

A second effort to identify the source of the significant multivariate effects involved computing a univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) for offense type with the GRAD domains as the dependent measures. The results revealed a significant main effect for offense type on the domain of family/parenting,  $F(1, 7) = 3.44$ ,  $p < .01$ . Post hoc tests revealed that incorrigible/unruly ( $M = 10.3$ ) and domestic violence ( $M = 12.1$ ) offenders displayed higher risk scores in the family/parenting domain than property ( $M = 8.6$ ) and person ( $M = 7.6$ ) offenders.



**Figure 1: Family/Parenting Means for Females and Males by Offense Type**

Given the significant gender differences reported above, male and female scores on the family/parenting domain were plotted separately by offense type for purposes of comparison (see Figure 1). Females of all offense categories generally displayed higher levels of family/parenting risks than males. At the same time, those youth charged with domestic violence consistently displayed the highest family/parenting risks in both the male and female samples.

## DISCUSSION

The present findings provide additional evidence regarding the influence of gender on the risks and needs of court-involved youth as well as further support for the development of gender-sensitive

assessment instruments for use with juvenile offenders. Analysis of risk scores coming from relatively equal numbers of males and females assessed in a detention facility generated evidence of significant gender differences in a substantial number of risk/needs domains, including prior offenses, family/parenting, mental health, traumatic events, health-related risks, psychopathy, accountability, and peer relationships.

Additionally, males and females differed significantly in the reason for their appearance in the detention facility. Girls were significantly more likely to be detained for charges stemming from incorrigible/unruly behaviors and domestic violence, whereas boys were more likely to be detained for property crimes and crimes against persons. In other words, girls were detained in far greater numbers for offenses that included family-related phenomena, such as exhibiting out of control behavior in the home and/or engaging in physical altercations with family members. In contrast, their male counterparts were detained for behaviors more closely associated with traditional crimes and specifically with offenses typically seen as being more "serious" in nature, such as robbery or aggravated assault.

Some of these family-related incidents might help to explain why female adolescents were differentiated from male adolescents on risk domains associated with trauma, family issues, and mental health concerns. These domains might well fit within a range of what might be called "gender-sensitive domains" that have been the focus of previous research on female delinquency. For example, the findings related to exposure to traumatic events are consistent with research on the backgrounds of violent female offenders (Artz, 1998), in which relatively high rates of trauma and prior victimization have been documented. The findings of this study that focus on the family-related problems of female delinquents also are consistent with the work of Funk (1999), who reported a female-specific model for reoffense behavior that included a history of child abuse and runaway behavior.

The notion that delinquent male and female adolescents will display substantially different rates of mental health and family-oriented issues also is consistent with other studies that have been conducted on similar populations. For instance, Dembo, Schmeidler,

Sue, Borden, and Manning (1995) reported that although males were more delinquent than females in a sample of detained youth, females showed higher rates of referral because of sexual abuse and exploitation issues and displayed higher rates of potential problems in a variety of mental health domains. Dembo et al. (1995) speculated that girls who appear in detention populations exhibit more overall serious behavior problems and psychopathology because there is considerably less societal tolerance for female delinquency. This latter finding would lend itself to an explanation of the significantly higher levels of psychopathy risk that were reported by females in this study as well.

Much more surprising was the fact that females displayed significantly higher risk/needs scores than males on some of the other "traditionally male" domains. More specifically, females reported significantly higher peer relationship risks and higher risks in the accountability domain than their male counterparts. As the females in this detention sample were more likely to have been charged with crimes related to the family environment (i.e., incorrigible/unruly and domestic violence offenses), they also may have been more likely to flee their homes and subsequently engage with peers on the streets who helped them negotiate an otherwise dangerous reality. Of course, many of these peers also would be delinquent offenders (Corrado, Odgers, & Cohen, 2000).

In turn, victimization in most if not all aspects of these girls' lives may convert into an anger response (Artz, 1998) that reaches a "tipping point" regarding the abandonment of personal responsibility. Girls may experience an inconsistent response from law enforcement throughout time. On one hand, they may be given so-called "passes" for some of their problematic behaviors (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2003), such as running away, only to be returned to the troubled home environment from which they were seeking refuge. On the other hand, these same girls may end up being processed by the system when they lash out and strike someone that was physically and/or sexually abusing them in the home. In these cases, the trauma of becoming involved in a criminal justice system that is ill equipped to deal with specialized needs related to victimization would translate with time into the significantly higher accountability domain risks/needs reported by the females in our sample such that

they report themselves as being less responsible for their own behaviors.

The present data also might help to explain the rather widespread notions among practitioners that girls are "harder to work with" and often present with more numerous and more serious problems to address (Baines & Alder, 1996). In a related fashion, the current findings support the importance of gender-responsive programming for court-involved girls (OJJDP, 1998a), even when they are charged with traditionally male offenses, such as assault (Artz, 1998).

Although this study is meant to sensitize researchers and practitioners to gender differences in juvenile justice populations, at the same time, there is the need to provide a cautionary remark. Among other things, the significant mean differences reported between female and male scores on various GRAD domain scores should be weighed against the fact that the distributions of these scores overlap appreciably. Hence, there is reason to believe that the risks/needs of most males and females fall within a common continuum. Future work will involve the examination of patterns of scores across all domains of the GRAD to refine this instrument's ability to provide practitioners with a comprehensive profile of male and female risks/needs.

In addition, gender differences on risk/needs scores must be considered in the larger context of how boys and girls may be differentially selected for detention. As noted earlier, girls were significantly more likely to be detained for incorrigible/unruly behaviors and domestic violence offenses. This means that parents are the most likely complainants in cases involving female adolescents. In contrast, as boys were significantly more likely to be detained for property and person-related offenses, the most likely complainant is a police officer acting on behalf of the citizenry at large.

Hence, boys are detained as a response to public safety issues, whereas girls are detained because of problems in the home. By and large, detention facilities were built solely with public safety in mind. One might assume that those adolescents (largely males) who have been deemed a threat to public safety will be better served by such a system, as much as incapacitation can be a deterrent to future criminal behavior. By comparison, detention facilities include programming that provides for the basic needs (i.e., education, health care, etc.) and thus typically do not offer family-based services.

Hence, those adolescents (largely female) who were detained because of problems in the home will not be as well served.

Finally, this study points toward the value of taking gender into account in broader theories of delinquency. Essentially, girls and boys grow up in worlds that are heavily affected by various aspects of their lives, including social class, race, and gender. Conventional delinquency theories, although carefully attending to the importance of class (and particularly the social impact of poverty), have done far less well in the gender and race domains (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2003). As a result, male delinquency has been seen as the norm, and females were the “other” (Cain, 1989), whose behavior was only understood if it closely resembled its male counterpart. The present findings suggest that a focus on those domains that only capture the risks to which boys are exposed will work for some girls, but it misses much that is actually far more predictive of future difficulties (e.g., exposure to traumatic events and mental health problems). Given that female arrests accounted for 29% of all juvenile arrests in 2002 (up from 24% in 1993; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2003) and that female arrests are up whereas male arrests are down, there is an urgent need to consider that those factors that affect girls specifically need to be addressed in both policy and practice.

Thus, with respect to gender differences in juvenile detainees, it appears that if one examines relatively equal numbers of males and females, if one uses gender as a factor in one’s analysis, and if one’s research effort extends the male-specific criminology literature into areas that are important to female well-being, then one likely will find evidence of gender differences and thus support for the “different needs” approach.

## APPENDIX

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### THE DOMAINS AND SAMPLE ITEMS OF THE GLOBAL RISK ASSESSMENT DEVICE

The prior offenses domain:

“Have the police or anyone else from law enforcement stopped you because of something you did?”

The family/parenting domain:

“Do you get into fights with adults who live in your home?”

The education/work domain:

“Have you had a difficult time getting to school or staying in school for the entire day?”

The peers domain:

“Do you have friends who have been in trouble with the law?”

The substance use domain:

“Have drugs and/or alcohol played a role in disrupting your academic performance?”

The leisure activities domain:

“Do you have a lot of spare time?”

The mental health issues domain:

“Do you have difficulty controlling your anger?”

The psychopathy domain:

“Do you try to manipulate or use others?”

The accountability domain:

“Do you feel more mad instead of guilty when you get caught doing something wrong?”

The traumatic events domain:

“Have you witnessed domestic violence in your home?”

The health-related risks domain:

“Have you taken money for a sexual act?”

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