

Young Women in the Juvenile Justice System

Report of Findings 1: Young Women's Offending

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Executive Summary

Increasing numbers of young women in the juvenile justice system in recent years and a growing awareness of their situation has meant that juvenile justice systems are becoming more concerned about the development of services that are accessible to, and meet the needs of, young women (Alder and Baines, 1996).

This report is part of a research project which had two objectives: (1) to investigate the nature of young women's offending; and (2) to examine young women's accounts of their experiences of the juvenile justice system. This report describes the findings in relation to the first of these objectives. A subsequent second report will describe the findings in relation to the second question.

The present research draws on two sources : (1) official statistics (Victorian Children's Court Statistics from 1990 to 1996); and (2) girls own accounts of their offending (young women in Melbourne and Adelaide who were currently on a Children's Court sentence either in the community (on Community Service Orders) or in detention).

Between 1990 and 1996, girls accounted for a relatively small proportion (less than 20%) of criminal (principal proven) offences decided in the Children's Court of Victoria. Most girls' offending is minor, with half consisting of Good Order offences of which most (70%) are transit offences.

The number of criminal cases involving girls increased by 81% between 1990 and 1996. This compares to a 26% increase in criminal offences committed by boys. Most of this increase is accounted for by the increase in Good Order offences (114% increase). A significant proportion of these offences are related to transit matters.

While most criminal matters against young people are initiated in the Children's Court by police, a higher proportion of girls cases (29%) than boys cases (10%) are initiated by transit police. Transit police initiated 40% of criminal cases against 16-17 year old girls in Victoria's Children's Court in 1995. Transit police initiated offences accounted for a more of the increase in girls' offences than boys' offences between 1990 and 1995.

There has been increasing speculation in recent years about increases in girls violent offending, however these findings indicate that the increase in girls' offending is predominantly accounted for by Good Order (mainly transit) offences. The proportion of violent crimes decided in the Children's Court for which girls were responsible dropped slightly in 1991 and 1992, but since 1993 has remained relatively stable, averaging around 20%. While there has been an increase in the number of violent offences committed by girls, violent offences have consistently accounted for less than 10% of girls offending. Further boys consistently account for approximately 80% of violent offences committed by young offenders. While the percentage increase in girls' violent offences (53%) between 1990 and 1996 was slightly higher than that for boys (41%), overall the increase in girls' violence accounted for only 23% of the overall increase in violent offences.

The offences committed by the girls interviewed in this study covered the full gamut of offending from being drunk and disorderly, to murder. Many of the girls had extensive histories of offending, most of which were various forms of “petty” offending – drinking related matters and shoplifting. Most girls had engaged in a “bit of everything”, a cocktail of drug related offences, theft, property damage and breaches of existing orders. For some of the girls this had developed into more serious offending including armed robbery and assaults.

In general girls were reluctant to talk in detail about their offending. As Sykes and Matza (1957) first pointed out, in accounts of their offences people tend to attempt to “neutralise” the seriousness of their behaviour. This was the case across the girls’ accounts of their offending in which they tended to justify their actions and to minimise their severity. Particularly in relation to offences involving violence, girls also spoke of their “shame” and embarrassment, and of their regret.

Many of the girls interviewed had left school at an early age, were unemployed and lacked any work experience. A number of the girls also seemed to be living on the streets, with friends or in foster care. Consequently they faced financial hardship which many referred to in explaining their offending behaviour. The need to obtain money to pay for drugs was frequently an issue raised by the girls.

Some young women indicated it because they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol that they committed offences. This explanation was offered particularly in relation to violent offences. Also in relation to violent offences, girls spoke of feelings of depression, anger and resentment.

Offending behaviour such as stealing cars and going for joy rides was described as emerging out of a sense of boredom and as thrill seeking. In these types of offences the role of peers seemed to be particularly important, particularly for Aboriginal girls.

Girls also engaged in offending behaviour, particularly assault, to protect or establish their reputation among peers. They described being provoked by slurs that often related to race or sexuality. For Aboriginal girls racist remarks addressed towards themselves or their families could provoke violence.

Nearly all of the girls described histories of family breakdown, abuse, unstable homes, and marginalisation. A connection between their backgrounds and offending behaviour was sometimes drawn by girls. For a few girls whose parents were also offenders, illegal activity was part of their environment from an early age.

A few girls tended to commit their offences on their own. However most of the girls spoke of either committing the offences with others, or under the influence of others. Peers played a role in the commission of offences not only as accomplices but also as mentors.

Most girls expressed the belief that they had learnt from their experiences, or were fed up with their lifestyle and wanted to change the direction of their lives. Our greatest challenge is to assist these young women in changing their life’s direction.

A. Introduction

The relatively small number of young women clients has always presented a challenge to juvenile justice policy-makers. Young men make up the bulk of young people in juvenile justice and consequently most programs and services have been developed with their needs and interests in mind (Cunneen and White, 1995). Increasing numbers of young women in the juvenile justice system in recent years and a growing awareness of their situation has meant that juvenile justice systems are becoming more concerned about the development of services that are accessible to, and meet the needs of, young women (Alder and Baines, 1996). However, there is very little research on young women in the juvenile justice system in Australia to draw upon. The major published research is now quite dated, for example Hancock (1989) and the Girls in Care Project (1986). The most recent significant research Carrington (1993) was based on data collected in NSW before major legislative reform.

The research upon which this report is based had two objectives: (1) to investigate the nature of young women's offending; and (2) to examine young women's accounts of their experiences of the juvenile justice system. This report describes the findings in relation to the first of these objectives. A subsequent second report will describe the findings in relation to the second objective

In Victoria, O'Grady (1992) found that subsequent to major changes in child welfare and juvenile justice legislation, there was an increase in the numbers of females appearing in the juvenile court on criminal matters. This increase was particularly marked for the 13-15 age group (in Queensland Beikoff (1996) similarly noted a particular increase for 13 and 14 year old girls). O'Grady also found that cases initiated by State Transit Authority officers accounted for a significant proportion of criminal cases. The present research extends O'Grady's analysis of Victorian Children's Court statistics to cover the period to 1996.

In the United States, data indicate an increase in young women's offending, particularly in terms of violent offences (Poe-Yamagata and Butts, 1996). While some concern has been expressed in Australia that increasingly young women are in the juvenile justice system on the basis of violent offending (eg Beikoff, 1996), this observation has not been extensively investigated. Research in Queensland which did examine this proposition more closely found that the violent offences tended to be of a "less serious" nature, frequently involving fights between teenage girls: in a third of cases the victim was the police (Beikoff, 1996). Similarly in regard to the nature of female juvenile "serious offending", it has been suggested that girls involved in incidents in welfare placements or foster care are being charged with criminal offences such as property damage, with subsequent bail refusal, guilty plea and control order resulting in the girl being characterised as a "serious offender" (Bargen, 1994).

Such findings indicate that an analysis of female juvenile offending requires not only an analysis of the offences as defined in official statistics, but an investigation of the behaviour which led to the arrest or conviction for a specific offence. To this end the present research approached the investigation of the nature of girls offending from two sources, the : (1) official statistics, and (2) girls own accounts of the incident.

The focus of the statistical analysis was Children's Court Statistics from 1990 to 1996 in Victoria. The figures used in this analysis were drawn from the annual "Children's Court Statistics" produced by the Caseflow Analysis Section of the Department of Justice. The time period was chosen on the basis of the data that were available. The analysis considered patterns of age, gender, initiating organisation and court outcomes. The data do not allow for analyses by race. During the period of the research, the Chief Investigator had ongoing consultations with the South Australian Office of Crime Statistics regarding similar analysis of their data. As a consequence of these discussions, the Office instigated a research project which entails not only analysis of aggregate statistics by category of offence, but also analysis of police narratives/descriptions of the behaviours that constituted the basis for charges in relation to selected violent offences. The results of this much larger project were not available at the time this report was being prepared.

Interviews with young women who were currently on a Children's Court sentence either in the community (on Community Service Orders) or in detention was the second data source for the analysis of girls offending. The intent of the interviews in relation to this aspect of the research was to obtain young women's accounts of their offence/s that had brought them to the Juvenile Justice System on both this and previous occasions. A total of 48 girls were interviewed in the overall research project. However, 12 girls were interviewed as members of one of two group interviews. The data for this report are drawn from interviews with the other 36 women. The majority of girls who were interviewed were on community based orders of some form (25). The remainder of the girls interviewed were in detention in either Parkville Youth Residential Centre in Victoria or Magill Youth Training Centre in South Australia.

This report provides a description of the findings of this research. The conceptual and theoretical implications of the findings will be developed and further elaborated in subsequent publications.

An important component of developing policy and practice is accurate knowledge of the forms of behaviour that bring the young person into the system. It is hoped that the analysis of patterns of offending by young women, and young women's accounts of their offending, that are contained in this report will contribute to the development of services that are accessible to and meet the needs of young women in the juvenile justice system.

B. Statistical Profile of Girls' Offending

This report is based primarily on figures derived from reports titled "Children's Court Statistics" which are produced annually by the Caseflow Analysis Section of the Department of Justice, Victoria. Annual Reports for the years 1990 through to 1996 were analysed. The data for Sections 1-4 concern principal *proven* offences in criminal matters heard in the Victorian Children's Courts. In Section 5 the data analysed relate to *all* completed criminal cases for the years 1990-1995.

1. Girls' contribution to juvenile crime, 1996

In 1996 girls were responsible for 18% of the principal proven offences dealt with in the Children's Courts of Victoria (Table 1). They accounted for 20% of all offences Against the Person and 21% of Good Order offences, and 15% of Property Offences.

Table 1: Type of offence by gender for principal proven offences in criminal matters heard in Victorian Children's Courts from 1/1/1996 to 31/12/1996.

Offence type	Girls		Boys		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Against Person	107	20	433	80	540	100
Against Property	522	15	2846	85	3368	100
Good Order	611	21	2356	79	2967	100
TOTAL	1240	18	5635	82	6875	100

Across the time period 1990 - 1996, while there were some fluctuations, girls' offences consistently made up less than 20% of all offences for which young people appeared in the Children's Court (Table 2).

Table 2: Total number of proven principal criminal offences heard in Victorian Children's Courts by gender for 1990-1996

Year	Girls	Boys	Total
1990	13% (n=686)	87% (n=4461)	100% (n=5147)
1991	17% (n=1177)	83% (n=5921)	100% (n=7098)
1992	17% (n=1445)	83% (n=6871)	100% (n=8316)
1993	15% (n=1009)	85% (n=5543)	100% (n=6552)
1994	18% (n=1448)	82% (n=6648)	100% (n=8096)
1995	17% (n=1117)	83% (n=5585)	100% (n=6702)
1996	18% (n=1240)	82% (n=5635)	100% (n=6875)

The proportion of violent crimes decided in the Children's Court for which girls were responsible dropped slightly in 1991 and 1992, but has since 1993 averaged around 20% (Table 3).

Table 3: Proportion of all violent offences (principal proven offences) committed by girls/boys in Victoria from 1990 - 1996.

Year	Girls	Boys	Total
1990	18% (n=70)	82% (n=309)	100% (n=379)
1991	13% (n=51)	87% (n=346)	100% (n=397)
1992	12% (n=54)	88% (n=405)	100% (n=459)
1993	19% (n=87)	81% (n=375)	100% (n=462)
1994	19% (n=120)	81% (n=509)	100% (n=629)
1995	21% (n=124)	79% (n=466)	100% (n=590)
1996	20% (n=107)	80% (n=433)	100% (n=540)

2. The nature of girls' offending in 1996

Good Order Offences

The bulk of girls offences are minor (Table 5). In 1996, close to half (49%) of girls' offences were Good Order offences. Of the Good Order offences most (70%) were transit offences (Table 4). Overall, transit offences accounted for 34% of all girls' offences. Failure to produce a valid ticket on request made up 72% (307 out of the

427 offences) of the transit offences. Virtually all (87%) of the transit offences involving girls related to ticket infractions including: not producing a valid ticket; not having a ticket; using an expired ticket; and tendering a materially altered ticket. A further 3% of transit offences involved failure to produce a concession entitlement and 3% placing feet on the furniture in a carriage.

Traffic violations made up 11% of girls' Good Order offences (Table 4). The majority of these offences (59%) were failure to wear an approved bicycle helmet. Alcohol offences comprised 8% of girls Good Order offences of which half (50%) related to possessing or consuming liquor when underage and 40% involved being drunk in a public place.

Under the general category of Good Order Offences there was also a specific category of Good Order offences which constituted 4% of all girls Good Order offences: 81% of these offences involved using indecent language or gestures in a public place (as compared to 33% of male Good Order offences).

Table 4: Good Order Offences heard in the Children's Court (principal proven offence) in 1996

Offence type	Girls		Boys		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Good Order	27	4	107	5	134	5
Drug	29	5	213	9	242	8
Traffic	69	11	887	38	956	32
Alcohol	48	8	178	8	226	8
Firearm	3	0	86	4	89	3
Transit	427	70	769	33	1196	40
Other	8	1	116	5	124	4
Total Good Order	611	99	2356	102	2967	100

Offences Against Property

Close to half of girls offences were Offences Against Property (42%). Of these most (67%) were theft. Under the category of theft a range of offences were included, however, the majority (94%) were simply listed as 'theft' with no further specification.

Offences Against the Person

Only 9% of girls offences consisted of Offences Against the Person. This category was dominated by assault offences (39%) and the more general category of 'other person' offences (45%). Of the assault offences 33% involved assault of a police officer or a person assisting the police. In comparison, 13% of boys' assaults were committed against the police.

Boys offending

For boys as well as girls, Offences Against the Person made up a small proportion (8%) of all their offences. However for boys, a larger proportion of their offending consisted of Offences Against the Property (51%), and less of their offending (42%) consisted of Good Order offences. As with girls, the bulk of boys Property Offences consisted of theft (56%).

The nature of boys Good Order Offences differed somewhat from that of girls (Table 4). In particular, 38% of boys' Good Order Offences consisted of traffic offences, while Transit offences constituted 33% (compared to the 70% for girls). As was the case with girls a substantial number of boys transit offences involved failure to produce a valid ticket on request (59%) with 73% of these transit offences involving some kind of ticket infringement.

Table 5: Gender by type of offence for Criminal matters (principal proven offence) heard in the Victorian Children's Courts from 1/1/1996 to 31/12/1996.

Offence type	Girls		Boys		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Assault	42	3	127	2	169	2
Sexual Assault	0	0	35	1	35	1
Other Person	48	4	206	4	254	4
Robbery	17	1	65	1	82	1
Tot. Against Person	107	9	433	8	540	8
Burglary	93	7	833	15	926	13
Theft	348	28	1589	28	1937	28
Property	60	5	393	7	453	7
Fraud	21	2	31	1	52	1
Tot. Against Prop.	522	42	2846	51	3368	49
Good Order	27	2	107	2	134	2
Drug	29	2	213	4	242	4
Traffic	69	6	887	16	956	14
Alcohol	48	4	178	3	226	3
Firearm	3	0	86	2	89	1
Transit	427	34	769	14	1196	17
Other	8	1	116	2	124	2
Total Good Order	611	49	2356	42	2967	43
TOTAL	1240	100	5635	101	6875	100

3. Nature of girls' offences, 1990-1996

The overall nature of girls offences has remained relatively consistent since 1990 (Table 6). In general the offences committed by girls are predominantly property and good order offences. Good order offences generally account for close to half of girls' offences, but the proportion has fluctuated across the time period. In 1990 they constituted 42% of all offences committed by girls, and to 49% in 1996, however, the proportion was higher in 1991 and 1992 (64% and 67% respectively).

The proportion of girls' offences that are Against Persons has fluctuated across the time period, but in general, violent offences account for less than 10% of all girls' offences. In 1990, 10% of girls' offences were violent, this varied only slightly in 1996 when the proportion was 9%. However the proportion fluctuated in the intervening years between 4% in 1991 and 1992 (which appear to be anomalous years) to 11% in 1995.

Table 6: Girls offending 1990 - 1996 by offence category (proven principal offences heard in the criminal division of Victorian Children's Courts)

Year	Person	Property	G. Order	Total
1990	10% (n=70)	48% (n=331)	42% (n=285)	100% (n=686)
1991	4% (n=51)	31% (n=370)	64% (n=756)	99% (n=1177)
1992	4% (n=54)	30% 427	67% (n=964)	101% (n=1445)
1993	9% (n=87)	38% (n=386)	53% (n=536)	100% (n=1009)
1994	8% (n=120)	37% (n=539)	54% (n=789)	99% (n=1448)
1995	11% (n=124)	43% (n=478)	46% (n=515)	100% (n=1117)
1996	9% (n=107)	42% (n=522)	49% (n=611)	100% (n=1240)

The proportion of boys' offences which are Against Person was consistently less than 8%, again fluctuating between 6% and 8% across the time period (Table 7). In general the proportion of boys offending that is violent is slightly less than that for girls. This observation needs to be considered in light of the observation that boys are responsible for most violent crimes committed by young people: 80% of violence offences brought before the Children's Court in 1996 were committed by boys.

Table 7: Boys offending 1990 - 1996 by offence category (proven principal offences heard in the criminal division of Victorian Children's Courts).

Year	Person	Property	G. Order	Total
1990	7% (n=309)	60% (n=2697)	33% (n=1455)	100% (n=4461)
1991	6% (n=346)	50% (n=2942)	44% (n=2633)	100% (n=5921)
1992	6% (n=405)	39% (n=2696)	55% (n=3770)	100% (n=6871)
1993	7% (n=375)	47% (n=2624)	46% (n=2544)	100% (n=5543)
1994	8% (n=509)	46% (n=3034)	47% (n=3105)	101% (n=6648)
1995	8% (n=466)	48% (n=2704)	43% (n=2415)	99% (n=5585)
1996	8% (n=433)	51% (n=2846)	42% (n=2356)	101% (n=5635)

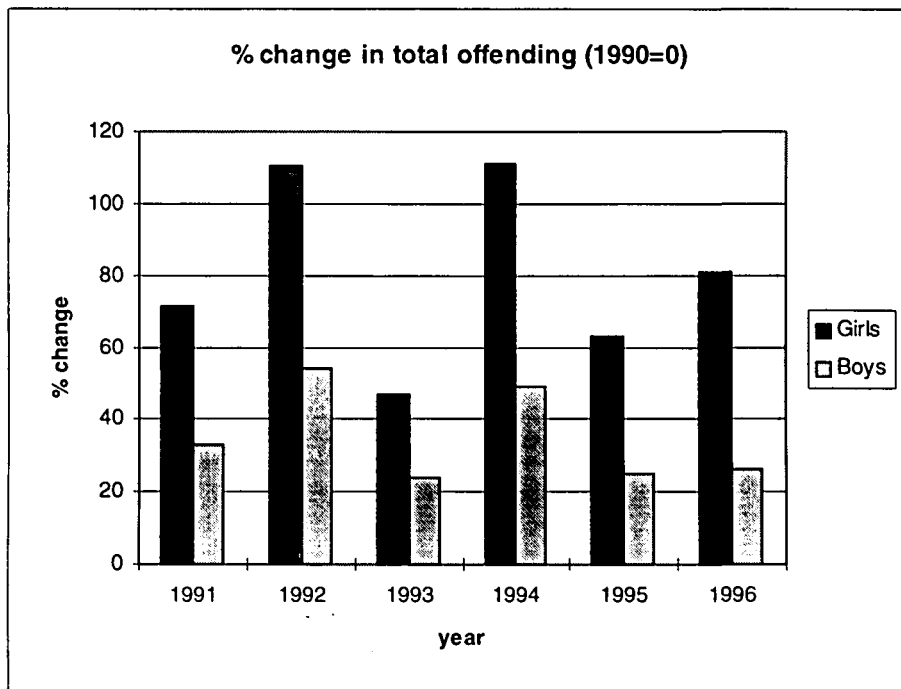
4. Increases in Offending 1990-1996

Across this time period there have been fluctuations in the percentage increases in overall criminal offences for both boys and girls, with the numbers of offences committed by both peaking in 1992 and 1994. Overall there was a 34% increase in the number of offences that brought children before the Children's Court between 1990 and 1996. There was an 81% increase the number of offences committed by girls over this time period (see Table 8). This increase is greater than the percentage increase for boys' offences, 26%. Nevertheless the increase in girls' offences accounted for 33% of the overall increase in offences. That is, while the increase in girls' offences has been greater than for boys, it is the increase in boys' offences that accounts for the bulk of the overall increase in offences.

Table 8: Trends in the total number of proven principal offences (% change) assuming a base of 0 in 1990 (Criminal matters heard in Victorian Children's Courts).

Year	Number			% change		
	Girls	Boys	Total	Girls	Boys	Total
1990	686	4461	5147	0	0	0
1991	1177	5921	7098	72	33	38
1992	1445	6871	8316	111	54	62
1993	1009	5543	6552	47	24	27
1994	1448	6648	8096	111	49	57
1995	1117	5585	6702	63	25	30
1996	1240	5635	6875	81	26	34

Figure 1:

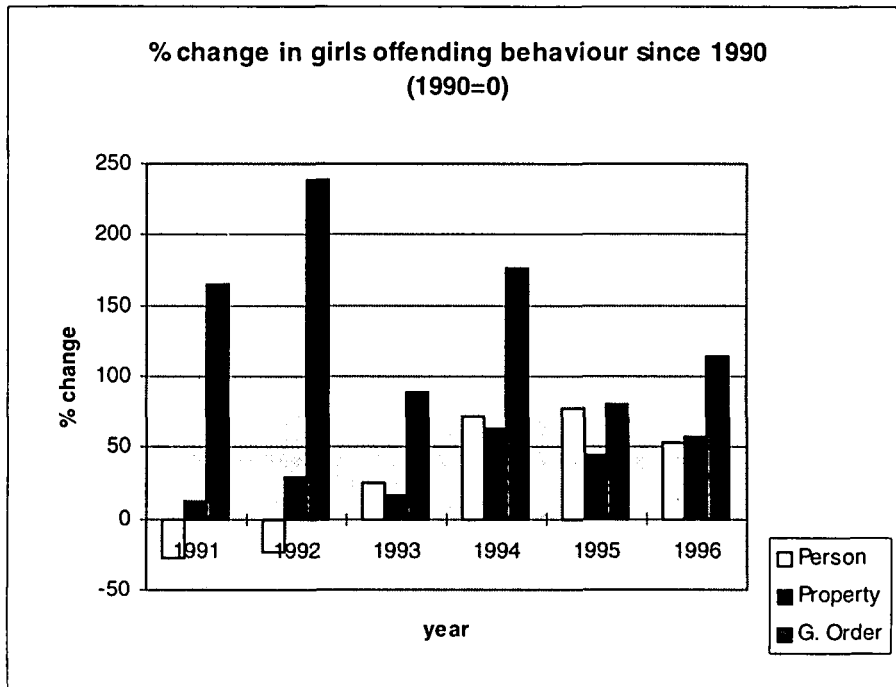


The increase in girls Good Order offences (percentage change =114%) between 1990 and 1996 was significantly higher than for either offences Against Persons (53%) or Against Property (58%) (Table 9).

Table 9: Percent change in girls' offending 1990 – 1996 by Offence Category (proven principal offences heard in the criminal division of Victorian Children's Courts)

Year	Number				% change			
	Person	Property	G. Order	Total	Person	Property	G. Order	Total
1990	70	331	285	686	0	0	0	0
1991	51	370	756	1177	-27	12	165	72
1992	54	427	964	1445	-23	29	238	111
1993	87	386	536	1009	24	17	88	47
1994	120	539	789	1448	71	63	177	111
1995	124	478	515	1117	77	44	81	63
1996	107	522	611	1240	53	58	114	81

Figure 2:

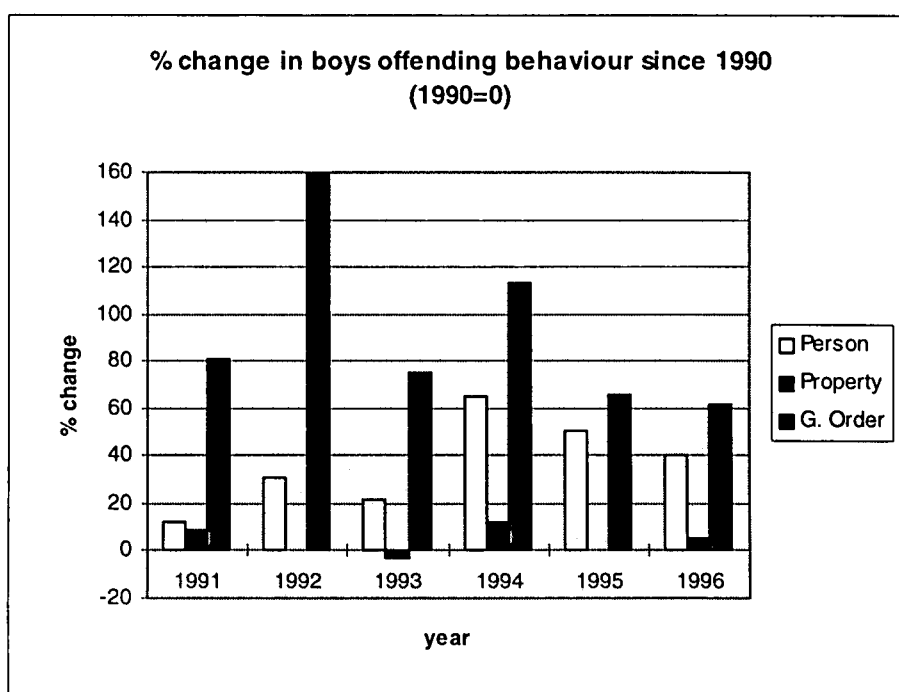


For boys, as for girls, the greatest percentage increase in category of offence between 1990 and 1996 was in Good Order offences (62%). Unlike girls, boys' property offences remained relatively stable increasing by 6% between 1990 and 1996. The percentage increase for girls was greater than for boys across all categories of offence (Table 10).

Table 10: % change in boys offending since 1990 (proven principal offences heard in the criminal division of Victorian Children's Courts).

Year	Number				% change			
	Person	Property	G. Order	Total	Person	Property	G. Order	Total
1990	309	2697	1455	4461	0	0	0	0
1991	346	2942	2633	5921	12	9	81	33
1992	405	2696	3770	6871	31	0	159	54
1993	375	2624	2544	5543	21	-3	75	24
1994	509	3034	3105	6648	65	12	113	49
1995	466	2704	2415	5585	51	0	66	25
1996	433	2846	2356	5635	41	6	62	26

Figure 3:



Less than one percent of the overall increase in offences was accounted for by an increase in Offences Against the Person. While the percentage increase in girls' violent offences (53%) was slightly higher than that for boys (41%), overall the increase in girls violence accounted for only 23% of the overall increase in violent offences.

5. Court Processing of Criminal Cases

The data in this section relate to completed cases heard in the criminal division of Victorian Children's Courts. However, the figures used in the previous sections were based on the principal *proven* offence (as indicated by the Clerk of Courts). In this section, the data are based on *all* completed criminal cases: matters which were withdrawn, struckout or dismissed are included in these data. In the following tables age refers to age at the date of final hearing.

Just under two-thirds of the criminal cases decided in the Children's Court involved boys and girls aged 16-17 years, in general just over one third were aged 13-15 years, and less than 3% were aged 10-12 years (Table 11). With minor fluctuations this pattern has been consistent across the time period 1990 – 1995.

Table 11: Criminal cases initiated against males and females aged 10-12, 13-15 and 16-17 years old from 1989 to 1995 (percentages indicate the proportion in each age group)

Year	Gender	10-12	13-15	16-17	Total*
1990	F	2% (n=14)	39% (n=293)	59% (n=445)	100% (n=752)
	M	3% (n=160)	37% (n=1737)	60% (n=2843)	100% (n=4740)
1991	F	0% (n=6)	29% (n=384)	71% (n=937)	100% (n=1327)
	M	3% (n=163)	34% (n=2129)	64% (n=4038)	101% (n=6330)
1992	F	1% (n=14)	30% (n=468)	70% (n=1102)	101% (n=1584)
	M	2% (n=127)	34% (n=2448)	65% (n=4691)	101% (n=7266)
1993	F	1% (n=6)	37% (n=384)	63% (n=657)	101% (n=1047)
	M	2% (n=140)	36% (n=2103)	61% (n=3547)	99% (n=5790)
1994	F	1% (n=18)	36% (n=513)	63% (n=909)	100% (n=1440)
	M	2% (n=149)	35% (n=2418)	63% (n=4392)	100% (n=6959)
1995	F	1% (n=12)	40% (n=476)	59% (n=707)	100% (n=1195)
	M	2% (n=135)	38% (n=2203)	60% (n=3506)	100% (n=5844)

* Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding error.

(i) Initiation of cases, 1990 - 1995

In 1995, most criminal cases (86%) were brought before the Victorian Children's Court by police. The remaining 14% cases were initiated by the Transit police. Cases initiated against boys and girls were most likely to be initiated by police: 71% of cases against girls and 90% of cases against boys (Table 11). However as these figures indicate, a higher proportion of girls than boys cases are initiated by transit police. In 1995, 29% of girls cases, compared with 10% of cases against boys were initiated by transit police. This pattern has been consistent across the period 1990 to 1995, with the proportion of girls cases initiated by transit cases being highest in 1991 (55%) and 1992 (54%).

Table 12: Percent of Children's Court criminal cases against 10-17 year olds initiated by police and transit by gender for years 1990-1995

Year	Females			Males		
	Police	Transit	Total	Police	Transit	Total
1990	70 (n=523)	30 (n=229)	100% (n=752)	84 (n=3993)	16 (n=747)	100% (n=4740)
1991	45 (n=602)	55 (n=725)	100% (n=1327)	72 (n=4574)	28 (n=1756)	100% (n=6330)
1992	46 (n=732)	54 (n=852)	100% (n=1584)	76 (n=5540)	24 (n=1726)	100% (n=7266)
1993	66 (n=687)	34 (n=360)	100% (n=1047)	85 (n=4928)	15 (n=862)	100% (n=5790)
1994	67 (n=947)	34 (n=493)	100% (n=1440)	84 (n=5819)	16 (n=1140)	100% (n=6959)
1995	71 (n=843)	29 (n=352)	100% (n=1195)	90 (n=5247)	10 (n=597)	100% (n=5844)

The proportion of girls criminal cases initiated by transit police in 1995 varied with age. Cases initiated against older girls (16-17 years) were significantly more likely to be initiated by transit police than they were for cases against younger girls: 40% of criminal cases involving girls aged 16-17 years were initiated by transit police compared to none of the cases involving 10-12 year old girls, and 14% of cases against 13-15 year old girls.

Similarly for boys, the proportion of criminal cases initiated by transit police in 1995 varied with age (see Table 13). However, cases against boys were much less likely to be initiated by transit police against boys of all ages: 14% of criminal cases against 16-17 year old males were initiated by transit police, 4% of cases against 13-15 year olds and none of the criminal cases involving 10-12 year olds.

This general pattern has been consistent across the period 1990-1995. For example, in 1990, transit police initiated 35% of criminal cases against 16-17 year old girls, and 19% against same aged boys. (Table 13)

Table 13: Criminal cases initiated by the police and transit police by gender and age for 1990 and 1995

Year	Age	Female			Male		
		Police	Transit	Total	Police	Transit	Total
1990	10-12	79% (n=11)	21% (n=3)	100% (n=14)	98% (n=157)	2% (n=3)	100% (n=160)
	13-15	76% (n=224)	24% (n=69)	100% (n=293)	88% (n=1526)	12% (n=211)	100% (n=1737)
	16-17	65% (n=288)	35% (n=157)	100% (n=445)	81% (n=2310)	19% (n=533)	100% (n=2843)
	Total	70% (n=523)	30% (n=229)	100% (n=752)	84% (n=3993)	16% (n=747)	100% (n=4740)
1995	10-12	100% (n=12)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=12)	100% (n=135)	0% (n=0)	100% (n=135)
	13-15	86% (n=408)	14% (n=68)	100% (n=476)	96% (n=2105)	4% (n=98)	100% (n=2203)
	16-17	60% (n=423)	40% (n=284)	100% (n=707)	86% (n=3007)	14% (n=499)	100% (n=3506)
	Total	71% (n=843)	29% (n=352)	100% (n=1195)	90% (n=5247)	10% (n=597)	100% (n=5844)

Transit police initiated offences account for more of the increase in girls offending than for boys. Between 1990 and 1995 cases initiated against girls increased by 443 cases, of these 123, or 28% were initiated by transit police. For boys while there was an increase in offending during the same time period, the number of cases initiated by transit police decreased, although there had been significant increase in the intervening years (Table 12).

If we look more closely at the patterns of change we find that it is the actions of transit police that have a significant impact on the offending patterns of girls as represented by Children's Court figures. The sharpest increase in cases that occurred in the time period under investigation was between 1990 and 1991. Over this period there was an increase of 575 cases initiated against girls, of these 496 (86%) were initiated by transit police. Consistently, when there was a decrease of 245 girls cases between 1994 and 1995, the decrease in transit initiated cases (141 cases) accounted for 58% of the cases.

The actions of transit police have the greatest impact on the number of 16-17 year old girls offences presented in court. For 16-17 year old girls, the number of offences between 1990 and 1995 increased from 445 to 707, a difference of 262 offences, or a 63% increase. The increase for girls aged 13-15 years was of the same order (62%), while the number of offences involving girls aged 10-12 remained approximately equivalent (1990=14, 1995=12). Of the 262 offence increase for girls aged 16-17 years, 127 were cases initiated by transit police. That is, 48% of the increase in girls offending in this age group, which accounts for most of the increase in girls offending, is accounted for by offences initiated by the transit police.

(ii) *Children's Court outcomes 1996*

Consistent with the overall minor nature of the offending, the most common outcome for boys and girls is a Fine (with or without conviction) (31% of boys offences, 36% of girls offences) (Table 13). The second most frequent outcome is a Good Behaviour Bond (without conviction) (26% of boys and 24% of girls). A further 28% of girls cases and 23% of boys were either Dismissed (without conviction), Withdrawn, or are Struck Out.

Again consistent with the slightly more serious pattern of boys offending, they are more likely than girls to receive a higher tariff community based order; 6% of boys compared to 3% of girls received either a Youth Supervision or Youth Attendance Order. Boys were also more likely than girls to receive a custodial sentence; 2% of boys and less than 1% of girls received either a Youth Residential or Youth Training Centre Order.

Table 14: Outcomes for the criminal division of the Victorian Children's Courts from 1/1/1996 to 21/12/1996.

Outcome	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Dismiss without conviction	234	3.9	62	4.6	296	4.1
Dismiss w/o conviction & order undertaking	141	2.4	46	3.4	187	2.6
Dismiss w/o conviction and order accountable undertaking	665	11.2	165	12.3	830	11.4
Good Behaviour Bond without conviction	1531	25.7	323	24.1	1854	25.4
Fine (with or without conviction)	1853	31.1	484	36.1	2337	32.0
Probation (with or without conviction)	694	11.6	114	8.5	808	11.1
Youth Supervision Order (with or w/o conviction)	295	5.0	38	2.8	333	4.6
Youth Attendance Order (with conviction)	86	1.4	2	0.1	88	1.2
Youth Residential Centre (with conviction)	9	0.2	1	0.1	10	0.1
Youth Training Centre (with conviction)	127	2.1	5	0.4	132	1.8
Withdrawn	120	2.0	43	3.2	163	2.2
Struckout or dismissed	204	3.4	56	4.2	260	3.6
Total	5959	100	1339	100	7298	100

6. Summary

Between 1990 and 1996, girls accounted for a relatively small proportion (less than 20%) of criminal (principal proven) offences decided in the Children's Court of Victoria. Most girls' offending is minor, with half consisting of Good Order offences of which most (70%) are transit offences.

The number of criminal cases involving girls increased by 81% between 1990 and 1996. This compares to a 26% increase in criminal offences committed by boys. Most of this increase is accounted for by the increase in Good Order offences (114% increase). A significant proportion of these offences are related to transit matters.

While most criminal matters against young people are initiated in the Children's Court by police, a higher proportion of girls cases (29%) than boys cases (10%) are initiated by transit police. Transit police initiated 40% of criminal cases against 16-17 year old girls in Victoria's Children's Court in 1995. Transit police initiated offences accounted for a more of the increase in girls' offences than boys' offences between 1990 and 1995.

There has been increasing speculation in recent years about increases in girls violent offending, however these findings indicate that the increase in girls' offending is predominantly accounted for by Good Order (mainly transit) offences. The proportion of violent crimes decided in the Children's Court for which girls were responsible dropped slightly in 1991 and 1992, but since 1993 has remained relatively stable, averaging around 20%. While there has been an increase in the number of violent offences committed by girls, violent offences have consistently accounted for less than 10% of girls offending. Further boys consistently account for approximately 80% of violent offences committed by young offenders. While the percentage increase in girls' violent offences (53%) between 1990 and 1996 was slightly higher than that for boys (41%), overall the increase in girls' violence accounted for only 23% of the overall increase in violent offences.

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boys (41%), overall the increase in girls' violence accounted for only 23% of the overall increase in violent offences.

C. Girls Talk of Offending

1. Introduction

It has long been acknowledged that official statistics tell us as much, if not more, about juvenile justice practices as they do about the actual behaviour of young people. In an effort to understand the nature of young women's offending, this research also involved interviews with young women in the juvenile justice system. The major thrust of these interviews was the young women's experiences of the juvenile justice system. However, the girls were also invited to speak about the offences that had brought them into the juvenile justice system on the present, and past occasions.

The material for this component of the report draws upon interviews with 36 young women. A further two group interviews were conducted involving 6 girls in each group, but questions about offending behaviour were not addressed in these interviews. Of the girls interviewed, 11 of the 36 were in detention at closed institutions; either Magill Training Centre in South Australia or Parkville Youth Residential Centre in Victoria. The remainder of the girls (25) were on community based orders of some sort. In Victoria, girls were interviewed at Juvenile Justice Units: Eastern Metropolitan; Western Metropolitan; Northern Metropolitan; and Southern Metropolitan, as well as Grassmere Youth Services. In South Australia interviews were conducted at the Lochiel Park Community Unit and the Metropolitan Aboriginal Youth Team (MAYT), a specialised unit within Community Based Programs (part of the Residential and Youth Services Division of Family and Community Services) dealing with 10-18 year old Aboriginal young people.

The girls ranged in age from 13 years to 20 years, with most of the girls (89%) aged between 15 and 18 years (Table 15).

Table 15: Ages of girls

Age	Number
13	1
14	0
15	8
16	9
17	3
18	12
19	1
20	1
Unknown	1
Total	36

The majority of girls (42%) identified themselves as Anglo-Saxon, while 24% of the girls were Aboriginal. Some girls indicated more than one nationality so the figures in the table below add up to more than 36 (the number of girls interviewed)

Table 16: Ethnicity of girls

Ethnicity	Number
Aboriginal	9
Anglo-Saxon	16
Asian	3
Maori	2
Other	3
Unknown	5
Total	38

2. Girls offences

A range of offences were reported by the girls interviewed in this research. At the most serious end of the offending spectrum one girl was awaiting sentence for murder, another had been charged with manslaughter and another with accessory to murder. Four of the girls indicated that they had been charged with armed robbery. At the other end of the scale girls had been charged with offences relating to drugs (use and possession), shoplifting, vandalism, theft (particularly theft of cars, sometimes accompanied by charges relating to high speed cases), burglary, robbery, property damage, drinking offences, and breaches of existing orders.

Girls frequently had numerous charges, often related to the same incident.

GG: I got in trouble once, that was a caution, for car theft, then after that I got in trouble again for, I think it was a shoplifting offence. It was a build up, the first charge was all right but then when I got the second charge, for the shoplifting offence, and then I got another charge for another stolen car, and then I got two assault charges and one for a kicking. It's pretty stupid in that way because the assault that I got by kicking, it was all one assault and then I got a separate assault charge for kicking, a separate assault charge for unlawfully assaulting, and a charge for ...

I: So it was just the one incident.

GG: Yes. From that one incident I got about three charges. (Gael, age 15)

R: I'm in here for lots of charges, failure to appear and warrants out for my arrest, burgs and heaps of things and I also had to undertake bail so when I went to court plus I'm signing on every day, reporting in every day at the cop shop. And that just did not go down well when I went to court, because I kept reoffending when I was still signing on. Just mainly burgs and things that got me in here.

I: Yes?

R: Just drugs, because I'm on drugs. (Rita, age 18)

Most frequently girls had committed a variety of crimes over the course of their adolescence. As one girl noted, she had been involved in 'a bit of everything'.

V: My criminal behaviours vary from armed robbery to theft of a [?], so it's been a bit of everything. (Vee, age 16)

Many had committed offences when quite young and offending behaviour had generally escalated in severity, or as one girl described 'moved up,' as she became older.

I: What sort of things were the offences for?

EE: Just stealing cars, and robberies, and that. Just stuff like that.

I: Basically the same sort of stuff all the time?

EE: No, I've moved on. When I was little I just used to steal clothes, go to old people and just steal cars, go for joy rides and that, but now I've sort of moved up.

I: So what do you...

EE: Not now, I've settled down, but before... (Eden, age 17)

As a consequence, girls in detention centres in particular frequently had extensive histories of involvement with the juvenile justice system.

I: What's your previous experiences with juvenile justice, have you had a long history?

F: Yeah, pretty much, I've been in and out of all different places.

I: Since when?

F: Since I've been eleven. (Francis, aged 18)

I: Was this your first visit here?

D: No I've been in this place when I was younger.

I: About how many times do you reckon you've been?

D: About twenty times.

I: How old were you when you first came in?

D: Fifteen. (Debbie, age 18).

While most of the offences reported by girls were not violent, some were, for example:

I: What was this robbery offence? What happened, what was it?

D: Robbery, assault on a girl, a lady. [Girl's name] who did it with me is in here too.

I: What did you do?

D: Just went up and went clogs with her. Didn't really do much, I'm pleading not guilty. (Debbie, age 18)

Weapons were not often used in girls offending. On the few occasions when the use of knives came up in interviews, they were generally discussed in relation to self-protection.

I: Would you carry weapons?

E: Yeah, I do.

I: Is that for self-protection?

E: Yeah. Not to bring it out and slash someone up or shoot them or something but just for my own protection.

I: And you feel that they help?

E: Not really help, but just give you a bit of more confidence, but if I have to use them I have to use them. Or if I'm in a punch up and like there's like fucking six, seven of them and one of me, well, then, it has to be brought out. And you can't be one of those people where you bring it out and say you're going to use it and then not going to use it because if you bring it out and say you're going to use it, and don't use it, well, it's going to be used against you, isn't it? (Ellie, age 15)

Girls who spoke of carrying a knife, nevertheless also talked of a reluctance to use such weapons in an encounter.

V: I've stolen guns as well, but it was with a knife, it was coming up to you with a knife, but I, at that time, I didn't really want to do it and I ended up pulling the knife off my friend at one stage because I couldn't handle what was happening, the other people getting so scared, I didn't want to be involved with it and all that sort of stuff. (Vee, age 16)

However, not all girls were reluctant to use the weapons they carried as in the case of Simone who stabbed someone during the course of a robbery.

S: And then me and my friends, we wanted to do something. All right, I had a knife on me. Sweet..... and then went up to this guy, so we were going to take his money, there was two hundred and fifty dollars, and he walked up to us and I go 'Whose is it?' he goes 'It's mine.' So I put a knife into him, say 'Whose is it?' 'Mine', 'Whose is it?', 'Mine' So then I stabbed him, and I go 'Whose is it now?' 'Yours.' (Simone, age 15)

For most girls interviewed weapons were not involved in their crimes and the seriousness of using a weapon was recognised by the girls. For example, despite being charged with robbery with violence after assaulting someone during the course of a robbery, Debbie presents her offending as less serious than her boyfriends because she did not use a weapon.

D: My boyfriend robbed a bank with a gun.

I: That's all the way serious.

D: I only robbed somebody not with a weapon. (Debbie, age 18)

3. Girls accounts of their offending

In general girls were reticent about talking in detail about their offending. As Sykes and Matza (1957) first pointed out, in accounts of their offences people tend to

attempt to “neutralise” the seriousness of their behaviour. This was the case across girls’ accounts of their offending in which they tended to justify their actions and to minimise the severity of their actions.

In a few cases girls were reluctant to discuss the exact nature of the offence(s) with which they were charged.

I: Let’s talk about last year’s [offence] the one that got you in here last year.

C: That was violence.

I: That was violence, was it? Do you want to tell me about that one?

C: Not really. (Cheryl, age 16)

Clearly, girls are likely to talk about their offences differently in different circumstance and in some instances some girls might very well speak of their offending with bravado. As one young women noted, “Some of them are more open than others. Some of them brag about it, some just don’t discuss it.” But as would be expected, most girls who did speak with us about their offending tended to play down the severity of the crimes.

I: Let's talk about that one, if you want to talk about it.

D: I assaulted a lady and went off with the safe, the money.

I: So you went into a house?

D: No, an office.

I: Tell me what happened.

D: I just walked in and out, and I got caught and they shoved me in here. (Debbie, age 18).

I: What sort of charges did you have?

BB: Really they were only petty charges, but still the charges were enough. There was one particular thing I was charged for.

I: What was that?

BB: Theft of motor car and driving without a license. There was no way of getting out of that, there was no proof of whose car it was. Fair enough, I didn't have a license. It was pretty reckless driving. Then I've got probably four or five theft charges hanging together with possession. Using a drug of dependence. (Barb, age 18).

The language employed by the girls in discussing their offences also served to lessen the severity of their behaviour. In describing their crimes girls used words such as ‘just’ and ‘only’, for example: ‘just steal cars’ (Nell); ‘Just stealing cars, robberies and that’ (Eden); ‘just pinch cars and stuff’ (Wendy); ‘It just happened’ (Denise); ‘I just went on a rampage’ (Fran); ‘It just happened’ (Ora); ‘I only robbed someone’ (Debbie). The language used by some girls allows them to justify their actions and minimise the severity of their crimes.

I: Who did you assault?

GG: Just a girl about my age from around my area. (Gael, age 15)

Some spoke of *accidentally* damaging property, or being caught as an accomplice when they were unaware of their companion's intent and some spoke of "Being in the wrong place at the wrong time"

Girls also spoke of their "shame", and embarrassment, and of their regret. Although willing to discuss her offence, robbery in company, Cheryl was reluctant to talk about prior offences. When asked, as were all girls, for permission to look at her file she refused, replying:

C: You'd be shocked to see mine. (Cheryl, age 16).

Reluctance to discuss offences seemed particularly evident where the charges were of a serious nature, as in the case of Denise who was charged with armed robbery.

DD: Well, I won't go right into it, I don't want anyone knowing what I actually did.

I: You don't have to go right into it.

DD: I feel ashamed of it. (Denise, age 15).

Feelings of shame and embarrassment were generally cited by girls in explaining their reticence in talking about their offences. For some girls this extended to not wanting other girls or their workers to be aware of their charges for fear of being judged by these individuals.

F: ..When you tell them [staff] you see that look on their face 'Oh my God'. Some of them pretend it's all right and then they're distant after that. (Francis, aged 18, convicted of manslaughter)

This was also the case for Ashley, who was unwilling to discuss the reason she was in detention. In her case she was awaiting her sentence on a charge of murder.

A: Well, I'm on remand and I have been for the last fifteen months. I'm actually waiting sentencing for my crime which I've no intention of disclosing.... (Ashley, age 18).

A: It's just not something I want to talk about. (Ashley, age 18).

Again, especially in relation to violent offences, not infrequently girls expressed their regret and incomprehension that they could have committed such an act.

I: Were you in shock afterwards?

DD: A lot, a lot of strife because as soon as we had done it we were actually on our way, because it wasn't successful, we just thought 'What have we just done?' and we even apologised to the shop owner, and we were on our way to hand ourselves in to the police station, and on our way because we were driving fast the police pulled us over.....The other thing I feel bad about, ...[pause] this guy who I tried to rob, it was like he had a right to live and a right to own his own business and run a milk bar and all that [indistinct].

I: How did he react afterwards, did he turn up at court?

DD: I don't know [indistinct] but we were unprepared... we didn't even know what we were doing in it. We didn't think 'This is an armed robbery.' I don't know how [Name's] taking it but every day when I think about it, I just run through my mind, all I can see is just him..... I didn't think it was that bad, you know. When you think about it now I can't believe I did it. (Denise, age 15).

I: Wouldn't it be easier to take it off a stand, in a jewellery shop, rather than take it off somebody's neck? What made you decide to take it?

X: I was just walking past the shop and just walked in just done something stupid and regretted it after. (Xavia, age 16)

Girls indicated they had certain moral standards when it came to considering the victim, particularly of a violent crime. They indicated there were certain people who they would not target.

E: My morals are, I would never bash an old, old lady, or never no old ladies or no people in wheelchairs or disabled people. (Ellie, age 16)

V: Because we can go in the girl's toilet, where the grandmas, the ladies, have got their purses out. Besides, what's not acceptable, is if you steal from each other, like you steal off your friends or you steal off someone you know, or elderly people or someone that's pregnant, that's my morals and ethics anyway. Some of them are different. but just because we can go in the toilet, we usually do purses like that. We used to do it in the shopping centre or something like that. (Vee, age 16)

Similarly some girls suggested that even when committing serious crimes, they maintained what they perceived to be appropriate standards of behaviour in terms of the language they used and the actions they undertook.

B: I entered a deli, I pulled out, first out I showed her the ratchet, it was a ratchet gun, I showed her it, like, and I don't think she saw it so I put it out on the counter, and I put it back, 'Don't worry I'm not going to use it' and I'm really nice to her, she was in hysterics, course anyone would be, but I just said 'I'm really sorry about this, but I need some money, there's some trouble', and she put it in a bag for me. She started to, her husband had taken the money to the bank, there was only a bit there, but I kept saying 'I'm really sorry about this, I'm just in some trouble and that' and I got the money and that, and cigarettes. (Billee, age 18)

I: ...What sort of things have you regularly been getting into trouble for? Were you doing burgs?

V: No, I've never done a crime that's affected someone personally. I've never stolen someone's car, I've burgled someone's house once, they were away, and all we took was wine and money, a few pieces of money. (Vee, age 16)

GG:Apparently, I was to take all of her gold off her as well, but I mean, me, I'm not a person to do that, because I know what it's like to have something taken from me. And I'll never do that to anybody, no matter what they do to me. As if I'd run over and start pounding her out of nowhere, just a lady walking to the shop, which is what I was meant to. (Gael, age 15).

4. The reasons given by girls for their offending

The reasons given by the girls for their offending behaviour were often related to financial need, frequently associated with supporting a drug habit. This motivation particularly related to offences such as robbery, theft and burglary where financial benefit could be achieved through offending.

I: When you think of the offences, if someone said to you 'Why did you do it?' what would you say?

D: Because I didn't have any money, I don't know. I didn't mean to have an expensive lifestyle. (Debbie, age 18)

B: It was probably drugs, drugs and pay the rent. (Billee, age 18)

I: Why did you just take it off somebody's neck? What made you go and decide to steal it?

X: I needed money. That's all. Needed to supply ourselves with, you know. (Xavia, age 16)

I: Right. And do you think that was part of being on drugs?

BB: Yes, because you become very selfish when you are on drugs. And I don't think many girls realise that but once you become that in debt, and you become a heavy drug user you don't realise how much selfish you've become in yourself, you just want to have more of the drug and there. (Barb, age 18)

I:So why were you going doing burls and stuff?

FF: I was in a drug debt. (Eden, age 17)

However, not all financially motivated crimes were related to drug use. Some girls spoke of having debts or needing money to cover living expenses.

I: So when did the other robbery happen, then?

X: That was a couple of months after. Not even a month. Everything sort of happened at once. You know 'There's nothing else to do for this young girl except walk the streets', you don't get that much money, it's like they don't understand, man, us kids, we can't live off a hundred and forty something, to last her for a whole fortnight. (Xavia, age 16)

DD: It wasn't just me, it was me and my sister, we were just sitting round one day. The courts thought it was for drug use, because I had been using heroin [indistinct] and [Name] my sister, was in a lot of debt, she'd just lost her job, her boyfriend had just lost his job, due to the wharfie strike. And they were like six hundred dollars in debt and the rent and then bills, and all that, so my boyfriend at the time suggested that it was a quick and easy way to get money. And it never happened that day, the next day or the day after, it was just boiling away in my head and I couldn't get it out. I don't know how it happened. It just happened and that's it. (Denise, age 15)

Many of the girls interviewed had left school at an early age, were unemployed and lacked any work experience. A number of the girls were living on the streets, with friends or in foster care. These circumstances help to explain why some girls faced financial hardship. However, obtaining money to buy drugs was the motivating factor given most often by girls when talking about financial factors influencing their offending.

Drug use was also linked to offending behaviour in other ways, particularly as an exculpatory factor, along with alcohol. Almost all the girls talked about using drugs and/or alcohol at some stage, with many linking use of these substances with their offences.

I: So how did you come to be at that deli, why did you decide to do it after all that time?

B: I needed to pay rent and score. (Billee, age 18)

S:And then I came back, that's when I hung around in the city. I rolled people, like I took their money, roll them for their money, for my drugs.... (Simone, age 15)

T: Yeah. It was a bit of a novelty at first and then I got fairly heavily into dope then and it wasn't even that I really liked smoking dope. I don't know why. I got sick of it after a while. I'd be like if I didn't have my marijuana daily, I'd get really... (Tracey, age 16)

Z:At the time I thought 'I can't live without it, I have to have it.' And then it got to the stage that I was using so much that I couldn't support my own habit, let alone my boyfriend's. So we ended up taking cars and selling things. Stealing things, becoming violent crooks, basically, doing things you probably wouldn't do, I'm not saying you wouldn't but probably wouldn't do if I wasn't on heroin.....It was like we were all into heroin. We paid for it by doing crime to pay for it. (Zea, age 15).

Some girls indicated that they did not know what they were doing because at the time they offended they were affected by drugs or alcohol. Thus they argued they committed crimes they would not have done if sober.

I: So what happened, what offence did you get the youth detention order for?

S: Stabbing.

I: Can you explain how that happened?

S: I was off my tree, this is on a Sunday night, I came in that night, I was drinking alcohol, and I had a cap. And then me and my friends, we wanted to do something.....

I:How did you feel when the cops came?

S: I can't remember, really. I couldn't really remember that I stabbed someone. I can't do that, I've got no guts. I know I've got the guts to do it but I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. (Simone, age 18)

I:What about the assaults, can you tell be about those?

W: That was just stupid. I was just off my face and I'd go up to anyone and start a fight.... (Wendy, age 17).

I: So how come they gave you probation?

FF: I just went on a rampage, did heaps of burls in Mornington. And a whole bottle shop, I was pretty drunk at the time. (Eden, age 17).

I: So do you have any other assault or robbery charges?

AA: Just mainly illegal use. Property damage. I done a petrol station when I was a bit out of it and started smashing it up.

I: So what were you on when you did that?

AA: I was drinking. I was with a friend and I don't know, we just lost it, we started smashing the petrol station up. (Alison, age unknown)

Feelings of depression, anger and resentment were also linked to offending according to the girls' accounts.

H: Psychiatric unit, it's for mental people but that's where they put me, but I'm not really mental.

I: Just angry.

H: Just very angry. They were going to send me back to Whyalla and I just started running amuck again, and with all my friends and me, getting drunk at night, getting home late at night, one o'clock in the morning I used to go home and they used to find me half asleep on the bench, in those shelter things like the bus-stop and I used to be half asleep then and they used to wake me up then, stick me in the cells for the night and let me out in the morning. (Helen, age 16)

T: Yeah, I'd get angry. I feel I had a lot of anger built up and so when that anger built up, I'd go out, stealing cars and breaking into cars, to try and get stuff which I could sell. I also stole some jewellery off my mum which I'm really ashamed of and I think that's when I really hit rock bottom, I stole jewellery off my mum.....(Tracey, age 16)

I: The time you were arrested, how did that come about, again?

K: I was at Sturt unit and I got extremely angry, like grabbed my lighter and started burning a curtain, and then this guy goes 'I'll restrain you if you don't move away! I'll give you a group order!' I thought, this'll be funny, do you want a go? And I went crash! to the window, it was crap and it smashed and even though it was double glass it smashed, and then I broke the door and that smashed and then I kicked it and put a big hole in the door and when they said 'Oh I'm going to restrain you' I said 'You try' and then I got done for assault for punching some guy's face. So then there were the two things, the staff would come out and say 'You wait, you wait.' (Karen, age 13)

Other girls described offending behaviour, particularly such things as stealing cars and going for joy rides as emerging out of a sense of boredom and as thrill seeking behaviour. In these types of offences the role of peers seemed to be particularly important, particularly for Aboriginal girls as in the cases of Nell and Alison.

I: Are you not scared when you're driving at high speed?

N: I'm scared they'll catch us, but I'm not scared at the time when I'm driving. Because I can't trust anyone with the driving. Even when I nearly crashed into a tree, I span the wheels around and the police were shooting at the tyres.

I: So you have confidence in your own driving.

N: That's right.

I: So why do you think you do it?

N: Just for the fun, to be with other people, see how they do it. (Nell, age 18)

I: So tell me about those, what was the robbery with violence, what happened?

AA: I was at a train station with a group of... it was at a train station, with my mates and I don't know, just got bored and there were some other people there, see, we started picking a fight and took whatever they had and because I was with them, I got done for it. (Alison, age unknown)

In talking about this type of behaviour girls spoke of experiencing boredom in other aspects of their life, such as school or home and thus seeking enjoyment through other avenues. Hanging around with friends and engaging in petty crimes were seen as more exciting alternatives.

Girls also engaged in offending behaviour, particularly assault, to protect or establish their reputation among peers.

D: If you can get away with it, you're a legend. If you get away, you're a legend but if you get caught or anything.... (Debbie, age 18).

I: And what was your reputation that you had to keep?

E: It was a bad reputation like fighting and you know, I don't-know..... (Ellie, age 16).

Ellie later expands upon the importance of pride in responding to slurs.

E: ...I don't care if they're bigger than me or tougher than me, or fast, as long as I give it all I've got, if they win and I've lost at least I know that I gave it all I've got and I've gone down with pride. I've had my head up and went down with pride, you know?

I: Is it important for you, to hold your head up high?

E: Yes, it is, and nothing's going to hold me down, nothing's going to stop me. I've been on my own since I was eight and a half, nine, nothing's going to stop me now, you know what I mean? (Ellie, age 16)

F:....But if we say we've going to do something we do something. If I say, 'I'm going to smash you' to one of the girls, eventually you do it. I You're very focused.

F: And we like to keep face a lot. (Francis, age 18)

Some girls described being provoked by slurs which often related to race or sexuality. In describing such incidents girls often mentioned the word 'slut' as an insult which would be found offensive.

GG:I mean now, I could get off a bus and just because I'm wearing the wrong bit of clothing or something, a girl could call me a slut and I could turn around and go 'I love you too' and walk off and be happy. I don't know why they even attempt it, then. (Gael, age 15)

For Aboriginal girls racist remarks addressed towards themselves or their families could provoke violence.

I: Give me an example of how the fight actually starts. How does it actually get going?

D: Well, racist remarks, if you're asking the time off them or something, and they know you, or me, family war, and you insult them. (Debbie, age 18)

For some girls, particularly Aboriginal girls, family appeared very significant and girls responded to perceived attacks on family members. Family, included both extended and immediate family, and was something to be protected. Verbal attacks or derogatory comments in relation to a person's relatives could result in retaliation.

I: So what sort of things do that girls control other girls?

D: If you don't like each you fight, that's what you do. Specially if you're like me, you're Aboriginal. Different families, you fight over the things that my sister did or my mother did. Often people will say things other people tell them to. (Debbie, age 18)

D: Lots of my friends and family fight, I'd join in sometimes, but I've been put on assault charges, because I come to the rescue of my family. I tell them I'm not going to do any more because that's the mouths that get them into trouble. (Debbie, age 18).

For some girls, their parents were also offenders and so offending was what they grew up with:

E:I've been an addict since I started using like about two weeks before my twelfth birthday. And I'm nearly seventeen. Because of all my problems, I didn't want to deal with them and I still don't want to deal with them and I think because seeing my mum doing it when I was young and because people I was hanging around with, I was always hanging round with a load of people and they're all doing it and just because they're doing it..... (Ellie, age 16)

I: When you were younger and you started getting into trouble what sort of things were you doing when you were younger that was bringing you to the notice of the juvenile justice system?

F: Stealing cars, assaulting people, getting into fights, stealing.

I: Was that with a group of friends?

F: Yes with my mum.

I: So that must have been hard with your mum being involved too, it would have been very hard for you not to be involved. Awfully hard. so were your friends supportive of what you did or...

F: Yep, we're all just rebels with a cause, I guess. (Francis, age 18)

For Debbie family was so important that the proceeds of her crime were given to her family.

D: Forced the lady to open the safe.

I: How did you do that? What happened?

D: Assaulted her.

I: Fists, hands?

D: Fists. Hands. Took it all, a lot of coins. Spent it all.

I: Spent it all, it the first week or days?

D: Not on myself, gave a lot to my family. (Debbie, age 18)

Nearly all of the girls described histories of family breakdown, abuse, unstable homes, and marginalisation. A connection between their backgrounds and offending behaviour was drawn by a few girls.

E: I don't talk to them [staff] about rape. I don't talk to none of them about my problems. I don't talk to anyone about my problems, I just keep them building up inside of me.

I: What happens when they build up?

E: Just get more violent..... (Ellie, age 16)

E: I got abused, sexually abused, and bashings, from the time I got home from school to the time I got....like I never used to get put to sleep, I used to get put in the corner with my legs apart facing the wall and if we got caught asleep we copped more beltings. (Ellie, age 16)

I: So how did you teach yourself, did you just go up and break into houses?

O: It just happened. And I hate myself, I didn't know I was going to do it, I was walking down the street, and it happened.

I: Just one of those things.....

O:I had no motivation from other people, I just did it because there was no other way. My child had been sick for about three weeks.....

Well, once my girl went into care, I started using. And my father was really stuffing up my life, he had been sitting on his bum and had been for four years, I had to get him out, had to get a restraining order to work, and my family, what I know of, users, drinkers, my nanna's an alcoholic, and I only seemed to have the drugs to turn to, and I started associating with people for it, and once I started getting up to \$500 a day, I couldn't, you know, I couldn't get that type of money from the trade, I had to do things, and I'd never done crime before, and at the same time, you don't realise what you are doing, because you just head straight, you don't realise what you are doing, you've just got to focus on getting your drug. And it was break-ins first, a house break in and those charges. They plonked five charges on me for each one. I feel really bad about what I've done, but I've done it. (Ora, age 19)

5. Peers and Offending

A few girls tended to commit their offences on their own.

I:So when you committed other crimes, did you do them on your own or with someone else.

BB: On my own. I'm a one-person criminal. Not a crim, I don't really do much wrong at all. With my charges, every one of them was pretty much on my own, except for two of them, which I committed with my boyfriend at the time. (Barb, age 18)

However most of the girls spoke of either committing the offences with others, or under the influence of others. High speed chases in particular were group orientated and related to the thrill of committing an offence (under age driving) and the danger offered by the high speed chases and the possibility of getting caught. Nearly all of girls interviewed described engaging in car theft and/or underage driving at some

stage, often at a young age and at times marking the beginning of their contact with the police.

N: I've just been hanging around with the wrong people getting drunk, carrying screwdrivers and thefts and carrying car keys on me. What I've been doing is stealing cars and getting in high-speed chases, I've been doing that since I was fourteen. (Nell, age 18)

A number of the girls spoke of having friends who were involved in crime, often characterised as the 'wrong crowd'.

J: Well, I was in Magill for assisting the commission of murder. My boyfriend at this stage was drunk, he was schizophrenic, I didn't know he was like that, he seemed like a normal person, and me, I just mixed with the wrong people. Whatever person comes along, I'll be friendly, because I'm a nice person. I was with this fellow for a while and he started changing over in the first few weeks, he started getting violent towards me.....(Jan, age 16).

I:When you were hanging around with your friends, were they doing crime and stuff?

K: Yeah. Definitely.

I: Did you know them from Sturt or before Sturt?

K: I've never had really good friends from outside the units and that but my best friend is from outside, [Name], she's really cool. But all the people I was hanging around with were people who had done really bad stuff and that. (Karen, age 13)

I: In your group of friends at the time, were they all doing the same sort of stuff?

Z: Not all my friends, but the crowd I was with at that time were. (Zea, age 15)

I: How old were you the first time you got into trouble with the police?

AA: When I was fourteen. I was just hanging around with the wrong crowd, I guess. (Alison, age unknown).

A number of girls described learning to commit crimes, such as stealing cars, from boyfriends or others. For example, one girl talked about hearing of a money scam from someone and much later deciding to put it into action herself (Barb, age 18). There was also some sense of learning about offending whilst incarcerated in juvenile justice facilities. So at least in part girls offending behaviour seemed to be something they learned whilst growing up.

A: I think a lot of the things the girls actually go has been taught by guys. They've been taught by guys. I've broken in cars, because a guy taught me. It's simple, you only need one trusty screwdriver and one trusty car. And you break into that car with the screwdriver. And I'm talking about, I don't want to do it. (Ashley, age 18)

D: No, I never stole cars because I never knew how to do it till my brother taught me how to do it and then I'd do it just like that. If you know how to do something, do it. If you don't know how to do something don't do it as much.

I: Right, so you think more girls are learning.

D: Yeah, girls are learning, they're taught by their boyfriends how to do it. And then it's easier to do, because it's really easy for them. It's not a hard thing, you know, it's easy. (Debbie, age 18)

So for some interviewees peers played a role in the commission of offences not only as accomplices but also as mentors. In other cases there seemed to be 'on the job training'. Girls were not learning from others so much as progressing through trial and error, and by finding themselves in situations where they had to develop particular skills.

GG:Because it's not hard to learn to fight this and that, you know what I mean. To learn how to bash up somebody, to learn how to KO somebody, and once you know how to do it you sit there and think 'Shit, why did I do it?'..... All girls will hit whoever they think's weaker than them. Me, I done that once, actually twice. The same person. I thought 'I'm going to belt her, because she's being smart, and she's weak. And if she's weak, she shouldn't be smart.' And that's the way she was thinking. And then, a bit later on, the fights I got into and that, I knew that I'd be beaten. And that's how I learned to fight, because I was that scared, I had to fight. I had to fight to protect myself and I was that scared, I didn't know my own strength and I didn't know what I could really do. (Gael, age 15)

Many of the girls indicated that the majority of their friends are or were male. Some girls also used disparaging language to indicate why they avoided friendships with other females, whilst other girls noted the advantages offered by male companionship.

J:But most of my friends are male, they're much easier to get along with. Like heaps of males I know hate doing crime, and females.

I: Why do they hate doing crime?

J: Because they're scared that the females are just going to dob them in. (Jan, age 16)

I: So with that group of friends, was it girls and boys mixed?

K: No, actually, I used to hang around with boys, I didn't hang around with girls at all. (Karen, age 13)

As well as having male friends many girls also spoke of boyfriends who they often lived with. These males were frequently significantly older than the girls.

E:we've been together thirteen months, he's twenty, and I'm what, he turns twenty-one in May, and I turn seventeen in June. (Ellie, age 16)

Many boyfriends also seemed to have been involved in criminal activities either with the girls or alone.

W: Well, it's basically around the year '96, because I was going out with this guy, he was a bit of a junkie and I became a bit of a junkie. He used to do crimes to get money, to pay for heroin, so I started doing it with him, just pinch cars and stuff, but the main incident was me and him went and did a burglary and he found keys for a brand new Mercedes [?] so we took that and just went driving around doing burglaries and stuff.....(Wendy, age 17).

A number of the boyfriends were at the time also serving time in either juvenile detention or adult gaols, or had done so at some stage according to the girls descriptions.

Z: It was afterwards. Because I've been on heroin, because my bloke at the time was getting locked up heaps, I was on heroin so I didn't have to deal with it, I didn't have to deal with my fucked up family, my bloke was locked up so I was by myself again, stuff like that. It was just sort of like a shield against reality. (Zea, age 15)

I: So you're still with your boyfriend? [her child's father]

F: No, I ditched him.

I Was that for going drugs again?

F: Yeah, then he faced trial, he pled guilty [?] and he won't give up doing them. It gives me stress....But I'm actually going out with someone else....He's actually locked up as well. (Francis, age 18)

The age disparity found in the girls association with boyfriends, also often characterised the girls relationships with other friends. Girls frequently described 'hanging around' with older people throughout their childhood, sometimes the friends of siblings or older relatives. In indicating the reasons for this choice one girl suggested she had less in common with peers her own age given her life experiences.

I: And was that a mixed group, boys and girls?

Q: Yes, and they were all much older as well, about the time I was getting into trouble. They were nineteen-twenty. I should have known better.

I: So when you got into trouble, the kids that you hung out with were obviously prone to getting into trouble themselves.

Q: Yes, they were. (Quella, age 18)

6. Giving up the life

Most girls expressed the belief that they had learnt from their experiences, or were fed up with their lifestyle and wanted to change the direction of their lives.

K: So I came in here and I used to be a real little brat, I used to swear my head off at anyone, run in front of cars, jump in front of cars and trash houses, do whatever I wanted, like get some old man or get some old person and stub a cigarette butt or flick a cigarette butt at them or something, I used to be a real runamuck.

I: How long did you do that?

K: From the age of eleven to thirteen, but now I've changed, I'm looking forward to getting out of here in like two months or something, because I've changed and I've ... so I thought I'd add that little bit in.
(Karen, age 13)

T: I believe that shoplifting becomes an addiction. I no longer have that, it comes back to you that way. All the shit that you do, it comes back, if you understand that. (Tracey, age 16)

GG:I've had that choice and it's just been, I reckon, I've settled down more, after I met my boyfriend, that's it. You want to do drugs and that, you want to stick things in your arm and that, come with me, I'm going to take you to my mate's house, I walk in that house, you know, and I look at people, that was the last, and that's it. I don't want nothing to do with drugs, nothing, no more. (Gael, age 15)

7. Summary

The offences committed by the girls interviewed in this study covered the full gamut of offending from being drunk and disorderly, to murder. Many of the girls had extensive histories of offending, most of which were various forms of “petty” offending – drinking related matters and shoplifting. Most girls had engaged in a “bit of everything”, a cocktail of drug related offences, theft, property damage and breaches of existing orders. For some of the girls this had developed into more serious offending including armed robbery and assaults.

In general girls were reluctant to talk in detail about their offending. As Sykes and Matza (1957) first pointed out, in accounts of their offences people tend to attempt to “neutralise” the seriousness of their behaviour. This was the case across the girls’ accounts of their offending in which they tended to justify their actions and to minimise their severity. Particularly in relation to offences involving violence, girls also spoke of their “shame” and embarrassment, and of their regret.

Many of the girls interviewed had left school at an early age, were unemployed and lacked any work experience. A number of the girls also seemed to be living on the streets, with friends or in foster care. Consequently they faced financial hardship which many referred to in explaining their offending behaviour. The need to obtain money to pay for drugs was frequently an issue raised by the girls.

Some young women indicated it because they were under the influence of drugs or alcohol that they committed offences. This explanation was offered particularly in relation to violent offences. Also in relation to violent offences, girls spoke of feelings of depression, anger and resentment.

Offending behaviour such as stealing cars and going for joy rides was described as emerging out of a sense of boredom and as thrill seeking. In these types of offences the role of peers seemed to be particularly important, particularly for Aboriginal girls.

Girls also engaged in offending behaviour, particularly assault, to protect or establish their reputation among peers. They described being provoked by slurs that often related to race or sexuality. For Aboriginal girls racist remarks addressed towards themselves or their families could provoke violence.

Nearly all of the girls described histories of family breakdown, abuse, unstable homes, and marginalisation. A connection between their backgrounds and offending behaviour was sometimes drawn by girls. For a few girls whose grown parents were also offenders, illegal activity was part of their environment from an early age.

A few girls tended to commit their offences on their own. However most of the girls spoke of either committing the offences with others, or under the influence of others. Peers played a role in the commission of offences not only as accomplices but also as mentors.

Most girls expressed the belief that they had learnt from their experiences, or were fed up with their lifestyle and wanted to change the direction of their lives. Our greatest challenge is to assist these young women in changing their life's direction.

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