“We’re Not Supposed to Have Nothing in Here”¹: Life in Juvenile Jail through the Voices of Incarcerated Girls

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ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

This article discusses findings from a subsection of data collected through qualitative interviews and observations inside a juvenile detention facility for girls. The analysis of incarcerated girls’ and their correctional counselors’ narratives reveals a contradiction between the rhetoric of rehabilitation and the actual behavior of staff encouraged within juvenile institutions. This paper discusses the impact such culture has on young women’s consciousness and prospects. It further contributes to the existing literature by revealing that the ideology of deprivation as intervention in contemporary juvenile correctional contexts systemically fosters an atmosphere of counter-rehabilitation that may be resistant to top-level reform legislation and programing.

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During the 1990s, the juvenile justice system faced a significant increase in the numbers of female offenders entering juvenile institutions (Acoca, Le, Poe-Yamagata, & Muckelroy, 2000; Porter, 2000; Scahill, 2000). Harms (2003) reports that the number of detained females increased by 50% as compared to a relatively low 4% increase for males. This increase was primarily due to an increase in violent offense charges for girls. Today, young women make up 16% of all juveniles in detention and 14% of juveniles in residential placement facilities, and they are more likely than their male counterparts to be confined for a technical violation (Hockenberry, 2013).

Court caseload and arrest trends have followed a similar pattern to detention and placement data. Since the late 1990s, court case loads for female juveniles have increased while male rates have remained stable (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). Moreover, between 2001 and 2010, person offense case rates decreased at a much lower pace for girls as compared...
to boys younger than 17. Interestingly though, during the same decade, caseloads increased by 8% for young women in the 17 year-old age group, whereas they dropped by 11% for 17 year-old males (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013).

Females currently represent 29% of all arrested juveniles, (Puzzanchera, 2013), and their arrests increasingly involve violent offense charges (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). The most recent data indicate that young women represent 1 out of 5 arrests for juvenile violence (Puzzanchera, 2013). Whereas males are still disproportionately involved in violence, arrest trends reveal some gender conversion: Between 2002 and 2011 the proportion of girls arrested for assaultive behavior increased. In general, in the first decade of the 21st century, while male offenses continued to drop significantly, arrests for females either dropped less (Puzzanchera, 2013), or increased for some offenses, for example, simple assaults (Puzzanchera & Adams, 2011).

Empirical research (Chesney-Lind, 2010; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008; Chesney-Lind & Paramore, 2001; Feld, 2009) attributes these increases to the changing attitudes of law enforcement and probation officers, to laws that re-label girls’ behaviors and criminalize victimized girls’ survival strategies, and to the drop in public mental health care options (General Accounting Office [GAO], 2003) that resulted in sending many girls otherwise ineligible for incarceration to juvenile detention facilities.

In 2007, the year before this study started, about 12% of the total juvenile inmate population in public and private facilities in California was female (Sickmund, Sladky, & Puzzanchera, 2011). The rate at which females were incarcerated in the same state was slightly higher than the national average (81 compared with 78 per 100,000) and much higher for minority youth, especially Hispanics. Not surprisingly, and despite the increase in arrests for violence, the strongest representation of detained and committed young women (as compared to their male counterparts) was still in non-violent, non-person offenses such as status (in particular, running away) and technical violations. In fact, in California, 11% of girls as compared to 3% of boys in residential placement had committed a status offense, whereas about 25% of confined girls (as compared to 14% of confined boys) were locked up for a technical violation (Sickmund et al., 2011). These gender disparities seem to have remained relatively stable between 2007 and present day.

These trends have sparked concerns over whether juvenile detention institutions provide the kinds of contexts where system-involved girls’ needs are addressed in a humane, fair, and effective manner (Bilsky & Chesney-Lind, 2010). Evidence suggests that greater involvement in the system increases impairment and recidivism among girls (Lederman, Dakoff, Larrea, & Li, 2004). Although literature on conditions of confinement for incarcerated girls has been sparse, qualitative studies in this area conducted mostly by feminist scholars (Acoca, 1998; Belknap, Holsinger, & Dunn, 1997; Bilsky & Chesney-Lind, 2010; Human Rights Watch [HRW] & American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2006; HRW, 1995, 1997; Kempf-Leonard & Sample, 2000) have revealed that abuse and neglect is commonplace inside juvenile institutions for girls in the United States. The current study aims to contribute to this line of research and take it one step further by examining how such conditions may be linked to system-involved girls’ difficulty to remain trouble free once released.

The analysis of this qualitative data set unravels the multiple ways in which the institution under study perpetuates the devastation that has shaped its clients’ pathways to detention. My findings indicate that a fundamental problem with the treatment of female juvenile offenders is a key contradiction between the institution’s stated goals and its practices. Like all juvenile institutions, especially those operating in a state, and run by a county with progressive ideals, this one too claims to be a rehabilitative place that wants girls to be successful, empowered, and confident; however, in practice it routinely undercuts those supposed aims at every turn. In doing so, it distorts young women’s views of themselves, their behaviors, and their prospects; it discourages critical self-reflection; and it normalizes loss of control over their own lives.

**Conditions of Confinement for Detained Girls**

A number of female youth institutions countrywide have, on paper, adopted rehabilitative and gender responsive principles and ideals. This is also the case for the correctional institution where the current study was conducted. However, whether rhetoric matches reality is an empirical question that very few studies have explored thus far through field research. Evidence from the limited number of studies using qualitative interviews with incarcerated young women reveals that conditions of confinement in these institutions are far from what they are advertised to be. In fact, they not only contradict the aforementioned principles, but they also mimic the multiple marginalization and victimizations that typically pervade the lives of system-involved girls outside detention (Chesney-Lind, 2001; 2010; Loper, 1999).
One such account comes from a 2006 Human Rights Watch (HRW) and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) report on confinement conditions for incarcerated girls in two state-run juvenile facilities in New York. This report summarizes and discusses data collected through in depth interviews with 30 formerly incarcerated girls and reveals that female delinquents have been subjected to abusive and neglectful conduct inside prison-like facilities that, contrary to their stated purpose, often fail to provide appropriate, meaningful, and rehabilitative services. Conditions of confinement in these New York institutions involved humiliation, hostility, and discrimination against young women who fail to meet socially constructed standards of femininity; blunt favoritism; prohibition of interactions between inmates; forced isolation; idleness; collective punishment; and even sexual and physical abuse. Young women complained about being threatened and yelled, screamed, or cursed at by staff. One of the respondents expressed feelings of being treated like a “dog” or “animal,” or not “as human” (p. 85). The report indicates that educational, vocational, mental health, treatment and reintegration programs and services are inadequate, haphazard, untailored, or ineffective. In fact, counseling services are provided by untrained staff counselors who lack the knowledge, but above all, the nurturing attributes to promote their wards’ wellbeing (HRW& ACLU, 2006).

Such reports are consistent with academic studies, such as the one by Leslie Acoca (1998) which used qualitative observations and interviews with incarcerated girls. Acoca’s study is of particular relevance to the current one because her sample was also drawn from female adolescent populations detained in county juvenile facilities in California. Reports of emotional, physical, psychological, and sexual harassment are abundant in the interview narratives. Girls in that study complained that staff members made them feel worthless, yelled and cursed at them constantly, and used unnecessary restraints such as handcuffs. Environmental conditions like poor quality food, shared clothing, and, at times, inhumane living arrangements also contributed to the young inmates’ degradation. Limited access to outdoor, or any, activities and isolation in bare rooms resulted in sadness and depression (Acoca, 1998).

More recently, Laurie Schaffner’s (2006) study used mixed methods, which included interviews with delinquent females and observations inside detention facilities in four different states. The author sought to “immerse” herself “in the worlds of young women in trouble, youth advocacy, and popular culture” (p. 45) in order to illuminate and contextualize the girls’ experiences with juvenile justice processing. Schaffner found that girls came from neighborhoods and families marked by rampant violence, poverty, racism, and sexism; however, interventions inside juvenile institutions often failed to critically or successfully address the impact of these conditions. To the contrary, correctional employees often exposed young women to gendered, racial, and homophobic stereotypes that urban minority youth typically face in the outside world (Schaffner, 2006).

Kempf-Leonard and Sample (2000), who analyzed focus-group discussions with at-risk female adolescents, also reported that girls’ experiences with the justice system were negative: They entailed perceptions of injustice and disrespect due to gender, overmedication, and lack of treatments responsive to experiences of abuse and neglect. Respondents in that sample expressed their desire for close, caring, stable relationships with well-adjusted adults to fill the gap of functional family in their lives (Kempf-Leonard & Sample, 2000).

Belknap et al. (1997) did not focus exclusively on conditions of confinement but rather on investigating potential gender biases in the administration of services within the juvenile justice system and identifying the needs of delinquent girls in order to inform policies that are responsive to these needs. Nevertheless, their study, which employed focus group interviews with delinquent girls and juvenile justice professionals in Ohio, offers valuable insights highlighting the treatment of young women throughout the juvenile justice system. Findings reflect girls’ frustration with insulting, humiliating, and offensive behavior by staff members; their unmet need for love, attention, and individualized treatment tailored to their specific needs; and their fear of failing to reintegrate once released.

Last, findings from a study that used grievances and incident reports as a proxy for conditions of confinement in the Honolulu Youth Detention center (Bilsky & Chesney-Lind, 2010) indicate that girls, a large number of whom were detained for non-violent status offenses, were often subjected to boredom, forced silence, and capricious regimentation and were likely (more likely than detained boys) to be harshly punished for minor infractions. The same study found that when young women protest conditions of confinement, which commonly violate federal, state, and international legislation and contradict the purposes of juvenile justice processing and treatment, they get into more trouble with correctional staff. Often times, as a result of these hostile living arrangements, girls become depressed, suicidal, and self-destructive (Bilsky & Chesney-Lind, 2010).

The current study is similar to the ones cited above, as it also uses qualitative methods to explore
the reality inside female detention institutions and gives a voice to those mostly affected by these conditions: the detained girls themselves. This paper presents the analysis of a subsection of data collected in a larger field research project that blended several kinds of qualitative approaches including observations and interviews. The focus of the larger project was on examining the conditions of confinement in female detention institutions and their effects on the detainees.

Methods

This field research followed an interpretive, feminist approach and was inspired among others by Gaarder and Belknap (2002) and Belknap et al. (1997) in the design, as well as in the execution. The most important goal of this approach was to give voice to the incarcerated girls who participated in the study, allow their perspectives to be heard, and ultimately, place them in the forefront of the analysis. This goal was realized through a qualitative design that included intensive interviews, and observations. Whereas observational data as well as informal conversations with frontline staff, supervisors, and parents were used to support and corroborate findings throughout, the bulk of the data in this paper came from qualitative interviews with detained girls.

Research Site

The research site for this study was the female unit inside a public juvenile institution in Southern California. The institution is a secure detention facility run by the county’s probation department, which, in addition, operates a jail unit for minors tried as adults and three non-secure placement facilities (camps) for adjudicated youth. However, only one placement option in the county is available to girls. As a result, the research site for this study was the larger of two and the only secure institution for delinquent girls in one of the most heavily populated counties in the country.

The facility detains female arrestees awaiting juvenile court hearings and adjudicated youth awaiting placement in the treatment camp, in some sort of community-based alternative (such as, for example, house arrest), or, less often, in a private institution. A large proportion of the residents in this unit, however, are there to serve a confinement sentence as other options are either unavailable or unaffordable or as consequence of a technical violation.

The unit was designed to house 40 young women, but this capacity was not reached during the two year study period. When this study began in 2008, this institution, similar to many youth correctional facilities nationwide, was faced with an increase in the number of female detainees, which averaged about 30-35 per day. However, coinciding with the figures in Sickmund et al. (2011), recently the trend seems to be reversing. Due to a shift in emphasis towards home-based rather than incarcerative post-adjudication options, there were fewer girls (about 20 to 25 day count) confined in the same unit by the time data collection was completed as compared to 2008. According to correctional staff in the research site, this change was a mere consequence of the budget crisis in California rather than a result of an intentional policy decision to effect de-institutionalization.

The juvenile justice system was founded on the philosophy of parens patriae, the idea that the state must act as the caretaker for minors who violate the law (Feld, 1998). Assuming that youth transgressions are due to inadequate or neglectful parenting, the state intervenes in order to provide the guidance. The system is also supposed to provide a nurturing atmosphere, something that the system-involved adolescents’ parents have failed to provide. Therefore, at least in theory, the primary purpose of juvenile justice processing and treatment has historically been and still is rehabilitation, rather than punishment, albeit notable with shifts toward crime control (Howell et al., 2013).4

In addition, according to the county’s probation website; literature that was shared during training sessions, fundraisers, and meetings with administrators; and personal communication with probation managers, this institution takes this commitment a step further: The department’s stated mission is indeed to use “efficient, innovative, and evidence based practices to promote lawful and productive lifestyles,” while its employees are “committed to delivering services with integrity and in a manner which respects the rights and dignity of individuals.” In addition, the institution is, at least in rhetoric, endorsing these ideals by implementing restorative and gender-specific practices. Gender specific practices address the unique nature of the problems associated with female delinquency (Lederman et al., 2004) and respond to particular needs of female offenders that hinder their successful reintegration in society (Bloom, Owens, Deschenes, & Rosenbaum, 2002; Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Cooney, Small, & O’Connor, 2008; Gavazzi, Yarcheck, & Chesney-Lind, 2006). Such programs focus on creating caring, comfortable, and inclusive environments that encourage self-expression and promote empowerment, relation support, healing, and safety (Chesney-Lind, 2001; Covington & Bloom, 2006; Valentine Foundation & Women’s Way, 1990). In fact, just before this study started, the
female unit had proudly announced their collaboration with a community organization in order to implement a so-called “gender empowerment and reintegration” program inside the facility, an announcement which partially motivated this research.

**Procedure**

Between October 2008 and May 2010, I conducted 1-2 hour-long interviews with 28 females incarcerated inside the facility (three girls were interviewed separately and then together for a second time). Because of the low numbers of girls in this institution, as well as the high frequency of the same young women returning into it, all girls in this unit were eligible for participation.

Participants were recruited through announcements to groups of 10 or more detainees. The announcements explained the purpose and method of the study. Potential participants were informed that the study was voluntary, and they were provided a study information sheet. If they were interested, they would fill out the name and phone number of their legal guardian on the study information sheet and would return it in order for the researcher to gain consent for participation. If the potential subject was over 18, she would print and sign her name on the appropriate space on the sheet and would be interviewed within about a week.

During the course of the study, I recruited about 150 girls. Of those, only a very small number (7) did not return a filled-out information sheet. An even smaller number (n=2) of guardians whose daughters had wanted to participate in my study did not consent. However, the response rate, as measured by the proportion of returned signed consent forms sent to guardians who consented over the phone, was very small (n=15). That number would have been even smaller had I not agreed to physically go meet with consenting guardians in their homes in order to receive the signed form. Moreover, attrition (subjects for whom I had consent forms but by the time I was able to interview them had left the unit or had been placed on disciplinary room isolation) was also very common.

Most interviews took place inside the facility in a private room usually reserved for small group counseling sessions. Although there was a camera inside and glass windows in the entrance door of the room, it was otherwise a private space, ideal for confidential conversations. A few interviews were conducted in the common open space area also referred to as the ‘cafeteria,’ or common room. The room was loud, due to staff conversations and the TV being always on, but we were allowed to sit in a relatively secluded corner where nobody other than I and the participant would be able to listen to the discussion.

The interview process and the wording of the questions drew heavily on Belknap and colleagues’ (1997) method of interviewing delinquent girls in Ohio. The current study applied similar techniques in order to create a comfortable environment and encourage open discussion of sensitive issues, while remaining focused on the purpose of the interview. I also recorded observations of respondents’ during the interviews. Since I was the only researcher present at the time of the interview, I audio-taped verbal responses while writing observations down in a note pad. Interviews were transcribed within one week and produced about 300 pages of qualitative data.

Interviews followed a life-history approach, were semi-structured, and consisted of questions on the following topics: the juvenile justice system and the subject’s trajectory through the system; childhood experiences; familial and peer relationships; views and attitudes about social institutions; their current experience in the facility, and in particular, their interactions with staff, counselors, and other residents; and the availability of treatment or recreational programs. Additional topics explored their thoughts about their own offending (causes, consequences, justifications), about their future as recidivists or desisters, and their policy suggestions. The analysis in this paper examines young women’s responses to their experiences throughout the juvenile justice system, with emphasis on their current experience in the facility and their suggestions on potential policy changes that would work better for them and other girls in similar situations to succeed and become happy.

**Participants**

Young women in my sample were between the ages of 14 and 19 (average age: 16), and about half (n=13) of all the respondents were adults at the time of the interview. Due to the persistent problem of disproportionate minority confinement in juvenile corrections (Chesney-Lind, 2010), girls of color were over-represented in my sample: the majority (n=19) of the girls were Latinas and the rest were White (n=7) and African American (n=2). With the exception of three first-timers, all other girls had been inside this facility multiple times in the past, some of them as many as 10 times (average times served: 4-5). Also consistent with past research (American Bar Association [ABA] & National Bar Association [NBA], 2001; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), this study showed that the most common reason for incarceration was a technical violation, most often for a status offense such as running away, not showing...
up to probation meetings, or being incorrigible, coupled with a consequent “dirty” drug test. Four of the girls I interviewed were pregnant at the time, and while nobody in my sample had children, several of them had had terminated a pregnancy in the past. Notably, all girls in my sample were or had been drug users. The most popular drug among my sample was methamphetamine. In terms of socio-economic background, the group of my respondents was multiply marginalized (Vigil, 1998), and exacerbating the effect of this marginalized status, family dysfunction, sexual and physical victimization, educational neglect, and domestic violence were present in the narratives of all 28 girls I interviewed.

Study Limitations

Although its findings are consistent with previous literature, which may allow room for broader conclusions and implications, like most qualitative research, the current study is low on generalizability. Additionally, although its sample is similar to those of the female inmate population in the particular county’s juvenile justice system, it is, nevertheless, not necessarily representative of the larger, nationwide population of detained girls. Another possible limitation is that findings are based primarily on girls’ accounts. They are, then, in some ways one-sided. They largely represent their subjective reality. Girls’ accounts, however, were also corroborated by my own observations inside the facility and by my frequent informal conversations with frontline staff, which not only did not contradict, but rather, enhanced girls’ narratives. Last, because I only had access to female detainees, I am unable to conclude with confidence that conditions of confinement for them are gendered, although girls’ accounts often suggest this.

Findings:

A Climate of Counter-Rehabilitation

The findings in the current study are similar to those of previously reviewed research in that they also reveal the inadequate and neglectful treatments to which detained girls are routinely exposed. The current study, however, differs from and expands past literature by moving beyond a mere description of confined young women’s experiences. This study reveals the ideology that prevails in a progressive juvenile justice system and how this ideology systematically trumps the goals of rehabilitation, reintegration, and gender empowerment. In other words, based on the analysis of the current qualitative data, I argue that abuse and neglect are not conditions that merely contradict the juvenile justice system’s goals, but that they have become the system’s main goals instead, transforming its institutions into spaces where deprivation is the standard intervention.

Fridigness

Girls detained in the facility where this study was conducted frequently complained about feelings of loneliness, boredom, and detachment. Residents were required to walk with their heads down and their hands behind their back and were not allowed to talk to each other without permission from staff members. Staff members, whom girls (and probation managers) referred to as “counselors,” were also discouraged from talking to juveniles under their care. In fact, during a Volunteer training I attended, former staff and probation officers leading the session advised future youth counselors to keep to themselves because delinquents were “manipulative and cunning” and would perceive “warmth as a sign of weakness.” Staff in the unit would address girls by their last name and would refrain from talking to them unless they were giving them orders. Several of my respondents described the relationship with their counselor as uninvolved. When I asked Tanya (14) about this relationship, she responded: “My counselor? Oh, I don’t really talk to her, unless I want to make a phone call or something.” Several participants shared similar sentiments. In fact, girls shared that some staff members were completely unresponsive to residents’ requests. As Jenni (16) complained, “staff would scream at everybody; like people would say ‘can I talk to you?’ and she’d say ‘No! I don’t have time for you’...And the whole time she would be on her cell phone.” Similarly, Vienna (15) told me,

Well, I know it’s not their job to listen to our problems, you know? That’s what they all say to us... And obviously they show that they don’t care ‘cause when we have a problem and we wanna let them know they say: “we don’t wanna know, we didn’t ask.”

Vienna, a bright young girl with a self-admitted “anger problem” who is nevertheless very cooperative with unit rules and staff demands, not only summarizes counselors’ unwillingness to counsel, but also excuses it. Even though Vienna says (and her violent history confirms) that she is always “willing to fight,” she often gives up trying to get her counselor’s attention, even when she needs it the most. One day, she wanted to call her older cousin, who was visiting from Mexico. “He always listens to me and keeps me out of trouble, you know?” she said, explaining why talking to him while locked-up was so important to her. She said that she kindly
asked her counselor permission to talk to her (so she would place the phone-call request), but the counselor refused to even listen to what Vienna had to say. She related the following experience:

I said, [submissive tone] ‘Ms. Y whenever you have time can I talk to you?’ And she said, ‘Yeah, whenever I have time.’ …All day she didn’t do anything, she was sitting there eating, texting, and I told everybody ‘hey let me know what she’s doing’ so when I was at bible study they were like ‘nothing’ …Why can’t she come and talk to me? Instead of texting, why can’t she talk to me?

Days passed, her cousin returned to Mexico, and Vienna never got a chance to make the phone call, or even ask permission for it; her reaction, however, was not anger, but rather, sad acceptance. When I asked her if someone had indeed told her that counseling or even talking is not something counselors are obliged to do according to their job description, she responded that no one had told her that, but that it was something she had assumed based on witnessing their behavior. This assumption was one of the many young women made that resulted in their overall perception that they were neither entitled, nor deserving of any kindness or care while detained.

Boredom and Segregation

While in detention, residents detested the long hours of inactivity (“there’s nothing to do here!” was a universal complaint) and room segregation they received. “We’re trapped in our room, miserable” proclaimed Isla, a 15-year-old respondent. Room isolation, the most commonly administered intervention in this unit, was traumatizing to newly admitted juveniles as it followed the shock and humiliation of arrest; it continued to be hurtful to girls who carried the additional weight of violent victimization and abuse in their memories. Yajaira, an 18 year-old child rape survivor, still recalls the time she was first brought into the unit at the age of 11: “They, like, put me with no roommate and I was, like, so terrified of being alone at the time!” Talia, who was 14 at the time of the interview, shared similar emotions: “Well, to me it’s scary in here because, like, you’re just in your room like behind these brick walls with nothing to do.” In fact, the benefit of a peer’s company to coping and healing was intrinsically understood by several girls, as the following excerpt relates:

And I came to [the institution] and Anna, the other girl too, she got arrested and she came in here with me too which was great…. I mean, It was sad that she had to be in here, but she helped me do time, like, different, you know what I mean? She was my roommate in here…because I was all hysterial then. (Dianne, 17)

The emotional impact of loneliness, isolation, and idleness surrounding adolescents in the unit is apparent in several girls’ narratives, as in the following one from Dora, a 17 year-old who had been incarcerated in the facility a total of eight times:

This place depresses you sometimes; you are used to being out and listen to music and all you hear here is yelling and …and you don’t have really anything to do but to think about all the things, and usually you remember things that make you feel bad…cause everything catches up to you.

It is notable that sadness and depression were already present in the lives of my respondents before their involvement with the criminal justice system, and the institution seemed to have missed an opportunity to reverse or alleviate them by offering activities that its design seemed to permit. The institution was surrounded by green space, a baseball field, and a few smaller courts for basketball or other athletic activities. However, of all the times I visited the site, I only saw them being used a couple of times, and never by females. This observation was shared by the girls:

I know that they play a lot of sports and like I’m an athlete you know like I’ve played on many things; I know what I’m doing….But they never allow me to participate….And do you see all these fields, out here? Oh, no, they are great….We NEVER go out to play, they just leave us here (in the cafeteria) and sometimes they play music and we jump up and down, and that’s it. (Trish, 18)

Barbra, a 15-year old who was born with fetal drug syndrome, likes to practice sports because it helps her cope with traumatic parental rejection (she was abandoned by both her parents), physical abuse by her older cousin, rape (at age 11), and several health problems, including addiction and depression. “Sports keep you happy,” she said in a trembling voice, taking pride in her softball talent. Barbra was chosen to play softball in the institution’s (all-male) team, but staff would not allow her to do so, because of what they called her “poor attitude.”
Depriving young women of what they need the most during adolescence, that is, emotional connection and support (Covington & Bloom, 2006; Matthews & Hubbard, 2008; Miller, 1976, 1990; Valentine Foundation & Women’s Way, 1990; Zavlek & Maniglia, 2007), seems to diminish their confidence in their own prospects and abilities to change the course of their lives. Staff members perhaps inadvertently reinforce these defeatist attitudes by frequently bringing up girls’ past failures. When, during my joint interview with Vienna and Bianca (15), I asked whether counselors gave them a “you can do it” pep talk at their release day, both young women seemed amused with my question: “Are you serious? You know what they say? Every time a girl is released here they say: ‘OK, see you in 24 hours!’” they both claimed in one voice. At the same time, staff members openly discount girls’ positive attributes or strengths. As Vienna explains, “Well, the staff here make fun of me, ‘cause I tell them I actually like school…And they’re like, ‘no one in here likes school.”’

“They think we’re mess-ups,” related another girl describing staff members’ expectations of the residents. She illustrated her point by describing the following incident: “One day that I was downstairs the counselor told me: ‘What are you hanging around my office for? Are you gonna steal something?’” (Yolanda, 18). Mistrust and disapproval is generally communicated in several ways inside the facility, but especially through strict scheduling and rule enforcement. In this cultural context, girls receive the message that they possess or control nothing.

First, girls are under constant staff watch. As my own recorded observations, my conversations with staff and parents, and especially my interview data indicate, staff members are present during visitations, monitoring and recording everything that is discussed between the inmate and her visitors (usually parents). My respondents complained that rooms are searched routinely on the pretext of safety maintenance, and personal effects such as drawings, books, and letters are removed. Such privacy intrusions can have detrimental consequences for a young woman’s psychological stability. For example, one girl went off because the staff entered her room and took away a sheet with song lyrics. Having control over lights in their cell is also out of the question and a major source of frustration among my interviewees. Vienna described what happened to a mentally ill girl, who was agitated because the staff had punished her with an “early bed”:

She was really-really upset, shouting, “It’s not fair,” and she started banging the door in her room, so the med lady came, and popped her out to give her her meds, and then the girl asked her lights off and they’re like “No- lights close at 9:30” … point is she walked where we used to have the toothbrush, she got the box and threw it on the desk, and then she started throwing other stuff and yelling “fuck this place,” so right away they called code 1 and had to calm her down….So they tackled her and that big guy, plus 8 other staff, and then they put her in the observation room, so she started banging her head in the wall.

Second, girls are obliged to follow a strict time schedule that cannot be bent for any reason short of illness: They are told when to sleep, wake up, leave their rooms, exercise, and shower. Several girls complained that exercise, although a rare and desired activity, also posed a great dilemma: “I feel gross, I stink” said Isla in the beginning of our interview, which started after a short-lived aerobics class. “We can’t shower now, only in the morning,” she explained. She looked genuinely embarrassed and uncomfortable in her sweaty clothes. Another interesting living arrangement was related to me by a couple of my respondents: Girls are allowed to apply lip balm only in the morning so several of them secretly save it by applying it to the wall of their cell—and that often results in punishment. Residents are also forced to wear used underwear:

Sharing underwear is the worst thing about this place…’cause the underwear we wear are not our own. It gets washed and passed around….It’s yucky and not good cause let’s say… I don’t know if they’re clean and what people come in with….It doesn’t feel right….And we only get to change our bras once a week. (Yajaira)

Third, letters sent to locked-up girls are opened, read, and scrutinized by frontline staff. Staff also decides whether to give these letters to their recipients. In some cases, young women are punished for the content of sent letters. In a characteristic case, a girl (Bertha, 17) got in trouble with her counselor because one of her friends greeted her with a “Hey, love I miss you.” My respondent was placed under room isolation and was treated with contempt because the letter raised suspicions that she was gay. Bertha was obviously distraught with the whole incident, and not just because she was punished for something another girl had written to her in private communication, but also because she felt rejected by her counselor, with whom until then,
she thought shared a good relationship. She explained,

If the staff look at it, it looks like wrong but that’s how [my friend] talks…Like the way she said “hey love” all the time…but he thought… I was like ’eww {Counselor’s last name}’ I was like “she’s my friend! We were like this!”… And I started crying…. I was mad…because he told me “I’m really disappointed of you.” And then when he started reading me the letter, and I started pouring tears…and he’s like “you know the other part the way she wrote to you,” and I was like, “but you know the way me and her were. She was my best friend!” and he’s, “I believe you. I believe you, but you know other staff would have readed [sic], and it would sound bad too.”

Consistent with past research (Pasko, 2010; Schaffner, 2006), data from the current study reveal that a strong heterosexist value system is enforced inside juvenile institutions, where girls are punished not only for their sexual identity, but even for exhibiting behaviors, such as affection, that may be misconstrued as deviant. “The staff here don’t like gay people” stated Brenda (17), who self-identified as gay. It was perhaps the reason why several girls (including Yajaira and Bianca) who had complained to me about not having a roommate felt the need to clarify that the reason they wanted one was not because they were gay, but because they liked company.

Last, residents are punished for not following rules and codes that are never explained to them beforehand, which makes their time in the unit confusing and stressful. As one girl explained,

It was the first time I had been there, when I was punished a lot… I was really slow to what they were trying to tell me. Like they would pop the door to my room open and they wanted me to immediately know what was going on and I didn’t…. (Yajaira)

Girls insisted that they would find out what they were supposed or not supposed to do by trial and error. I was told a different story by the staff who claimed that the rules were posted on the walls for everyone to read. The rules are posted in the facility, but since looking around was one of the prohibited behaviors, this rule-posting proved ineffective. With time, young girls are directed to believe that in order to become “good” and “straighten up” they must accept this process as normative. Victoria, 16, for example, became accustomed to penalties for harmless acts, such as smiling:

I used to, like, be bad. Like, I’d smile a lot. Like, I wouldn’t care, so the staff was very hard on me. The staff would give me early bed every single day…. You can’t smile or you’ll get in trouble…. It’s nonverbal communication, …and I’d get in trouble; like, I have a nervous smirk.

Obeying what they understand as nonsensical and purposeless rules, however, increased feelings of powerlessness and failure while diminishing self-worth. As one girl stated,

I don’t think it’d make sense. If we’re like bitchy, they’ll be- they’ll give us early bed. OK, so one time I got early bed and they said, ‘Poor attitude.’ Ok, so I get early bed by smiling, I get early bed if I have poor attitude. You know what I mean? I can never do right! (Victoria)

“Well, I’m gonna screw up anyways, why not do it sooner?” said Lori (19) explaining her attitude towards these rules. It was an attitude shared by most inmates.

Gendered Abuse and Insults

The young women’s worth and dignity was attacked in more direct ways as well, namely through the use of psychological and verbal abuse by staff members. Evidence of this type of victimization was abundant in the interview narratives as well as my observational data (the staff made no attempt to hide their abusive behavior from me, although they were aware that I was taking notes).

Staff members would call young women names, such as “fuckin lil’ brat” or “evil child,” as one of my respondents, Bianca, was often addressed by her counselor. According to Bianca, the same counselor once gave Bianca’s name to a pile of feces in the yard and made sure she was there to witness him laughing about it. Bianca’s plight inside the institution—and her antagonistic relationship with her counselor and most frontline staff—had gained notoriety among the residents of the unit. Her story was corroborated by a few other young women who used Bianca’s situation to illustrate the reasons why they frequently do not resist mistreatment by talking back or by following the formal grievance procedures to which they are entitled by law. Bianca, however, talks back and has filed formal complaints against her counselor. I was especially intrigued to interview her even before I met her, largely as a function of comments made to
me by frontline staff when they saw Bianca’s name on the list of residents I had received consent to interview. One sarcastically asked, “How much time do you have?” Two of his peers who were present rolled their eyes. Her counselor added “Good luck with that one. She will not shut up.” When I responded that I was looking forward to talking with such a girl, Bianca’s counselor pointed out that I was lucky to have caught Bianca in the small window of time in which she was not in isolation.

Because Bianca has filed several grievances against her counselor, she faces frequent punishments and mistreatment by most other staff as well. Moreover, according to Bianca and several other young women, although this mistreatment is known to the unit supervisors, correctional managers seem unwilling or unable to put a stop to it. Bianca illustrated this point with the following story:

And it got me mad cause on Wednesday, I was in room 6 and Thursday, I was in room 22, and then Friday, I was in room 5 and then yesterday, they moved me to 7…. And you know room 7 is in the corner and sometimes cockroaches come in so I asked for a towel to put under my door, and they’re like, “oh you don’t need it; you’ll be moving rooms tomorrow again,” and I was like WTF? “Why do you guys do that?” …Yesterday, they were banging my door every time they would go by…. I was sleeping and they would bang my door; first I was scared, but then I got mad…. And then they would get on the speakerphone and they would put their cell phone on it and have this ringtone play that says: “Wake up Bitch, Wake Up Bitch”…. Then, Ms. “M” comes and was like “who are you talking to,” and I was like, “you need to stop,” and they started banging on my door…. They do that just to irritate me.

The latter incident had resulted in throwing Bianca into depression, a condition which is often masked by aggressive and risk taking behaviors similar to those in which Bianca had engaged repeatedly (drunk driving, drug use, fighting). “I declined all day yesterday,” she told me when I first interviewed her, “I didn’t eat breakfast, lunch, anything; I was sleeping all day, and they kept coming and banging on my door…."

Constant mocking, yelling, name calling, and cursing are treatments that girls like Bianca face while detained. As Isla summarized, “They’re kinda like cracking jokes in front of everyone like laughing like, you know, degrading.” Girls are often mocked for their appearance. Once, I asked frontline staff to point out to me the girl I was supposed to interview. The girl, who had braided her hair up in pigtails was standing very close by, so the employee told me loud enough so that she and everybody else could hear: “Do you see that one, with these two things sticking out from her head? That’s her!” Another girl, who was going through drug withdrawals, was humiliated in front of others:

One of the counselors, well, she was degrading to me. When she saw me she would be like “oh yeah, children, this is why you don’t do drugs” or something like that, cause I’d come in and I’d be coming down. (Trish)

Lori, a young woman who insists that she sees staff members as her family because she has spent her whole adolescence in this unit, did not escape humiliation either:

The other day I was just walking by a staff and she’s like “eww” and I knew….I get a lot of stuff from the staff cause I’m the only girl here with so many tattoos, but she looked at me disgusted…. I was very upset cause, like, these staff, they’re not that much older than me, you know? They look down to me; they like to pretend they have a lot of power, you know? …They’re just very rude, and they talk down to me, and I get very angry.

Lori told me that she knows that such comments constitute reason to file a grievance. However, grievances are avoided. First, they make things worse because the staff members join together in being vengeful to the girl who formally complained. They call them “snitches” and make life much harder for them by harshly penalizing them for minor infractions. “Staff are with staff,” as Monique, 18, explained, and are therefore “unbreakable.” Second, grievances result in no positive outcomes for the complainant. Bianca’s situation, for example, has become increasingly worse, even though her mistreatment is well known to her public defender, her correctional therapist, and the supervisors in the unit, all of whom are supportive of her. Nevertheless, Bianca is still placed in the same unit, under the care of the same counselor about whom she has grieved.

No Way Out

It is not a big surprise then that a large number of my respondents have accepted these conditions of confinement as an unalterable part of life in the unit.
and find it pointless not only to fight against them, but also to complain about them:

Yeah, like a lot of the girls like to complain about everything and, oh my gosh, and this and that but it’s, like, you know, you don’t really have control over the situation. I’ve kinda learned that from coming back so many times. (Amy, 19)

Again, having been stripped of any sense of control over their bodies, their immediate environment, their possessions, their relationships, their ideas, and their sense of self in general, girls in this unit often express fatalistic attitudes and doubt as to whether any effort on their behalf will be effective in changing their pathway back to detention. In other words, their self-efficacy is diminished. Study participants attribute the poor treatments they receive and the resulting lack of self-efficacy to their delinquent status: “They say we’re in here, cause we’re obviously not good people, cause we’re in here for something bad, you know” (Vienna).

These perceptions were not unfounded as similar ideas were reiterated in conversations I had with frontline staff members. Counselors believed that female delinquents violated the law because they were spoiled and selfish. They dismissed sociological explanations of delinquency by saying that they too “grew up poor, in the ghetto, but did not turn to crime.” They believed that detained girls had nothing in common with their own teenage daughters: Comparing his ward with his daughter, one counselor said that his child is “miles away” better, in a way de-humanizing delinquent girls, or at least denying the fact that they, too, were children.

Several of my respondents had bought into others' views of them as incorrigible, “bad,” and unworthy and had internalized feelings of shame and self-loathing. “I don’t deserve any better” and “I should give up trying” were the types of comments I frequently recorded. My respondents had also internalized staff members’ conceptualization of deterrence. Several young women reported that the staff often yelled at them, saying: “We want you to be miserable. We want you to do your time unhappy!” Tanya justified such yelling by explaining that the staff is “[mean], so we won’t get comfortable in here.” This reasoning was something several other young women referred to in order to make sense of the hostile correctional environment of the institution. This reasoning shaped girls’ “spoiled” identity. As Brenda explained,

“We’re not supposed to have nothing in here … ‘cause we’re criminals.”

Contrary to what counselors seemed to believe, this sense of hopelessness, apparent in the narratives of almost all my respondents, contradicts any possibility that such attacks would deter young women from future involvement with the law:

They say that being in your room all the time and staring at your 4 walls makes you think…I don’t think that…It makes you think: “Oh I don’t want to be here and I’d do anything to get out”…and pretty much…you sit there thinking and there’s so much thinking, that you are convincing yourself in your head that what you’re gonna do is right, but when you get out it’s not the same. “I’m gonna do this and I’m gonna do that”, and you have all day to think about it, and you keep saying it over and over again… you say it to your PO and the judge, you try to convince them, and sometimes they give you a chance and then you get out and you do the same thing. (Monique)

Monique very powerfully points out that deprivation during detention has no impact on the social context which contributes to girls’ pathways to juvenile processing and does not in any way provide them with the attributes, strengths, or resources to rise above structural disadvantage or personal trauma. Deprivation, instead, stands in the way of a critical understanding of delinquent girls’ behavior and gives rise to conflicting accounts regarding their repeat incarcerations. Girls are troubled and confused by their own behaviors and by the correctional responses those behaviors receive. Frustrated, confused, and uncertain about who is to blame here, they end up reproducing the language of blame they are accustomed to hearing. What follows is a medley of quotes illustrating self-blame, confusion, and unresolved feelings of shame and embarrassment:

I am doing good in the program but yet I am struggling with how I feel. (Isla)

I let the little voice in my head control me! (Victoria)

I am working on myself…. I want to change…. I wanna become a better person than when I came in. (Vienna)
Analysis: Deprivation as Intervention

My findings reveal a gap between speech and practice, as well as a stark contrast between what “ought to be” and what “is” in this juvenile institution. Conditions of confinement for incarcerated girls not only ignore, but are antithetical to the institution’s mission statement and purpose of rehabilitation and innovation. Indeed, the interventions that take place seem to be designed with the opposite goal in mind: to attack young women’s sense of control, confidence, and prospects.

The preceding narratives illustrate how this happens and highlight the devastating consequences it has on girls’ lives: Girls are routinely subjected to boredom and idleness; room segregation; privacy and dignity assaults; enforced silence and needless regimentation; vague, poorly articulated, but pervasive rules; anti-supportive, stigmatizing attitudes; and emotional/psychological abuse and neglect. These patterns reflect the counter-rehabilitation view that the institution is designed to deprive, and this, in turn, is based on a dim and pessimistic perception of who these young women are and where they are expected to go in life.

These findings are consistent with previous studies inside female juvenile institutions (Acoca, 1998; Belknap et al., 1997; Bilsky & Chesney-Lind, 2010; HRW & ACLU, 2006; HRW, 1995; 1997; Kempf-Leonard & Sample, 2000; Pasko, 2010; Schaffner, 2006), indicating that these views are common and seem to be deeply rooted in the punitive culture of penal control. Even more discouraging is that these views seem to prevail over ideas that system-involved youth need guidance, nurturing, and healing, ideas that drive recent juvenile justice reform efforts. Despite the county’s commitments and probation directors’ promises, counter-rehabilitation ideology is systematically reflected in the inmates’ treatment, when Unit “X” doors close behind top officials. This treatment is the reality of life inside this juvenile facility, a reality illuminated through the eyes of those who live it day-in, day-out.

This treatment causes something more than a conflict with the department’s mission, the standards of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention ([OJJDP], 1998), or human rights. It impacts girls’ self-image by subtly forcing them to develop a criminal understanding of themselves and their actions and to construct a “fallen” identity. As such, it contributes to young girls’ further marginalization and powerlessness.

Adolescent girls in this institution experience what Miller (1990) calls condemned isolation. They also experience negative emotions such as embarrassment/exposure and unresolved shame (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001). Combined with the lack of material resources and aftercare, these emotions undermine girls’ self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), making it difficult to turn their lives around, as most of them dream they will do one day.

Condemned Isolation

My findings illustrate that the state of condemned isolation that saturates system-involved girls’ lives in the outside world is maintained, if not reinforced, inside juvenile institutions. Condemned isolation (Miller, 1976, 1990), refers not only to the physical, social, and psychological disconnections that result from arrest and incarceration, but also to the emotional impact that these disconnections have on female inmates’ lives and especially on their adolescent development.

Connections with others are very important to females (Surrey, 1985). Furthermore, evidence suggests that relational support promotes feelings of safety, and safety is a critical aspect of success in girls’ programming (Bloom & Covington, 2006; Koons, Burrow, Morash, & Bynam, 1997; Ms. Foundation for Women, 2001; OJJDP, 1998; Zavlek & Maniglia, 2007). Because delinquent girls typically enter the system already traumatized by unhealthy, disrupted, or abusive relationships, correctional environments that foster separation, frigidity, and indifference exacerbate these traumas. According to Miller (1990) condemned isolation creates feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness and encourages internalization of blame so that the person is made to think that something is wrong with her personally. Condemned isolation may result in destructive behaviors and a “depressive spiral that is the opposite of growth” and that “characterizes too well the females in our criminal justice system” (Covington, 2008, p. 145).

This pervasive sense of isolation characterizes the females in the facility under study. Most of them felt ignored, unloved, powerless, and unfairly treated; most had given up efforts to assert themselves or hopes that their circumstances would improve. Given the strict regimentation inside the facility and the socio-economic disadvantage and aggressive law enforcement in the communities they return to, girls in my sample were presented with countless opportunities of rule breaking. Because girls tend to internalize failure (Gilligan, 1982) it is not surprising that several of my respondents felt like they were “screw-ups” or “f*ck-ups” (terms that several of them used throughout their narratives) that could
never do right, a finding strikingly similar to the report by the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute (as cited in Ziemb-Davis, Garcia, Kincaid, Gullans, & Myers, 2004). They would come back again and again, and they all shared a sad prognosis. The concept of condemned isolation, then, captures the essence of delinquent girls’ overall experiences with the juvenile justice system. It also perpetuates and exacerbates the consequences of the stigma these young women have been accustomed to carrying since their first contact with social control agencies. Reintegrative shaming concepts (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001) may help specify how these consequences affect girls’ self-perceptions, while self-efficacy propositions (Bandura, 1997) may explain how they affect girls’ actual prognosis.

**Embarrassment/Exposure and Unresolved Shame**

Many of the negative treatments young women related in their narratives were not only unfair but also violated the probation department’s rules regarding respectful and humane treatment of system-involved persons. When the young women filed grievances, they rarely received a response. There was an obvious reason for that: the grievance box was right in front of frontline staff, so several girls felt intimidated, especially knowing from past experiences that to file a grievance would mean to face retaliatory actions (such as early bed, “picking on,” and room isolation). These retaliatory actions were wielded not only by the counselor/line staff member against whom the complaint was filed, but from every one of his/her peers in the unit. Whereas girls felt that their treatment lacked legitimacy, many of them had trouble processing this feeling and seemed confused as to whether the treatment was deserved, and they often normalized it as a necessary corollary of detention. When I asked them if they thought that being treated unfairly was their fault, they would offer conflicting responses, blaming staff, rules, and, in the end, themselves, all in the same response.

Their attitude toward their delinquent behavior was similarly conflicted. There was not one instance during my interviews where girls tried to (consciously) attribute their misbehavior to others. This finding is quite different from Schaffner’s (2006), who reported that girls in her study often used accounts to excuse or justify their violent offending. Whereas my sample was smaller, and only included a few girls who had committed violence, I found that my respondents typically blamed themselves by saying that they had trouble controlling their anger or that there was a “voice” inside them which kept telling them to be “bad.” Several of them seemed embarrassed and wanted to find out why they were being “bad” and how they could change, yet, at the same time, they would also think of themselves as generally good at heart.

These expressions seem to fit Reintegrative Shaming Theory’s (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001) concepts of Embarrassment/Exposure and Unresolved Shame, both of which are negative emotions that indicate an inability to manage one’s guilt of wrongdoing in a productive, healthy way. Embarrassment/exposure refers to feelings of awkwardness and humiliation, whereas unresolved shame means that one is bothered by others’ judgments and cannot decide whether and what they have done wrong. Both contribute to frustration and anger (Harris & Fallot, 2001). It is empirically unclear whether they also contribute to higher recidivism rates, but as Reintegrative Shaming Theory suggests, and research (Tosouni & Ireland, 2008) confirms, they are both a result of stigmatization and procedural injustice, of the kind to which young women in the current study are perpetually exposed.

**Self-efficacy**

This climate of counter-rehabilitation undermines self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), the belief that one is capable of executing desired actions. This is evident not only in observed correctional practices that challenged girls’ independence and sense of control, but also in narratives that related a sense of futility and surrender. Persons with low self-efficacy tend to think that they are unable to change their future on their own.

Unfortunately, this perception was not entirely unfounded. Alternatives were rare, and meaningful rehabilitation or reintegration assistance existed only on paper. Several times in my informal conversations with staff and counselors in this unit, I heard attributions of reoffending to delinquent girls’ lack of self-esteem. In fact, in discussing some (scarce) counseling sessions they had received, girls in my sample seemed perplexed, if not bothered, by counselors’ attempts to persuade them that the reason why they were incarcerated was because they had low self-esteem. “I don’t have a low self-esteem; I have low confidence” a few of them protested. Indeed, girls believed that they possessed both talents and potential, but they also thought that those were wasted due to their involvement with the law, drugs, and bad friends. They felt that their hands were tied and that they were unable to achieve anything other than constantly disappointing themselves and others. So, their narratives did not link their actions to low self-esteem, but instead to doubt that legitimate sources for coping with poverty, loneliness, and lack of power were available to them.
Discussion: System Failure

This denial of nurture, empathy, and valuable activities for incarcerated girls reflects the idea that positive treatment might pass the wrong message that deviance is not only tolerated, but also rewarded. As my findings suggest, correctional officers see it as their duty to make young women under their supervision feel miserable and unhappy in order to deter them from recidivating. In addition, they impose so many rules and demands that rather than helping them avoid reincarceration, they actually increase their chances of reentering the system (Lederman et al., 2004). Their behavior is not incidental, but routine and systemic. Their attitudes about how to “straighten up” young girls are not based only on personal ideology, as it was communicated to me in casual conversations, but on what seem to be the standard prescriptions of juvenile institutions’ cultural milieu.

Evidence from studies with similar purpose and methods to mine (Acoca, 1998; Belknap et al., 1997; Blisky & Chesney-Lind, 2010; HRW & ACLU, 2006; HRW, 1995; 1997; Kempf-Leonard & Sample, 2000) suggests that deprivation as intervention, also evidenced in my respondents’ narratives, may be a typical and wide-spread phenomenon in juvenile detention centers. My findings add to this literature by indicating that what happens inside juvenile institutions attacks young females’ prospects of rehabilitation and self-efficacy in a gender-specific way. Instead of providing real assistance, the conditions of confinement for incarcerated girls reproduce the powerlessness and marginalization that permeates their lives outside the system. This, in turn, explains why, as past research has indicated, girls who have been incarcerated are more likely than those who have not to engage in repeat delinquent behaviors. They are less likely to transition into adulthood as well-balanced, independent, and trouble-free women (Lederman et al., 2004). I argue that because girls are disempowered by being treated as if they have no rights, feelings, or prospects, they are likely to fulfill the prophecy of re-offending.

My analysis makes an additional contribution by raising the following concern: It suggests that counter-rehabilitation practices are largely invisible and well concealed under the veil of evidence-based programing and of justice reforms declarations. The reality of girls’ living conditions is hidden to those who have the authority to change them. What really goes on in the field may only be exposed through research on the field. Unfortunately, access to juvenile institutions is difficult and time-consuming to gain, which understandably discourages potential researchers from pursuing this type of study. Even when bureaucratic channels are navigated to achieve access, data collection often becomes unnecessarily frustrating. Consider, for example, that access to a total instruction requires various levels of formal approvals by both the researcher’s intuition (e.g., IRBs) and the correctional institution. But in spite of the fact that we had agreed upon access and research protocols in a formal research contract, these agreements mattered little to frontline staff. They expected me to follow the rules they made up, such as visiting only when they deemed it convenient for them, rather than abiding by the rules in formally approved research contract, which appeared to mean little to them. As one line counselor characteristically told me soon after my data collection began, “If we don’t want you here, you won’t be here.” It is understandable, then, that qualitative studies inside these institutions are rare. The few studies that successfully come to fruition (after successful navigation of both formal agreements and practical barriers) naturally lack the generalizability that would allow the large persuasive power that quantitative studies enjoy. Nevertheless, qualitative research may be the only way to determine whether real help and empowerment is provided to incarcerated populations. In the next section, I discuss this argument in light of recent juvenile justice reforms in California.

Although it may sometimes seem to be the case, my analysis does not aim to assign blame on frontline staff or to pass judgment on their actions. First, as Acoca (1998) eloquently disclaimed, “Reports of victimizations are included here not to castigate the majority of juvenile justice and correctional professionals” (p.574). Nowhere in my observations did I find any shred of malicious intent in correctional counselors’ actions; rather, it was often obvious that their actions were driven by a desire to perform their duties as these duties were conceptualized and communicated to them during training. Perhaps misguided, correctional staff seemed to be doing what they thought their job title required them to do: correct delinquent youth. If the language used to describe their actions here is strong, that is because the alleged violations are strong as well; it is also because incarcerated girls’ voices are not. It is this paper’s aim to bring out these voices so they can be heard loudly and clearly and beyond the plausible rhetoric of rehabilitation which silences them. This paper also aims to encourage researchers to obtain uninterrupted access inside juvenile institutions so that more qualitative work can examine the perspectives of incarcerated youth.
Study Implications: System Reform or Business as Usual?

It probably comes as no surprise that the young women who were interviewed for this study were unsatisfied with the treatment they received by the juvenile justice system. Moreover, they believed that there were much more effective and humane ways to help similarly-situated girls. These views are expressed in the following quotes:

I’m against the system. In the system, the person doesn’t get looked at as a human being. They get looked at as a convict, a criminal and they don’t get any … respect (Shelley, 18).

Most of us that are in here, the one thing that we want is stability. None of us has stability…and this is no place to get it. Well, maybe [you can get it] somewhere you don’t have to leave and you know you could always go there. And like, sustained people, the same faces. Like a mom and a dad. (Dianne)

Despite the grim tone in this study’s narratives, recent developments in juvenile justice offer reasons to be optimistic that effective and humane ways to respond to troubled youth are becoming increasingly popular across the United States. It seems that the juvenile justice policy pendulum is swinging back to its original rehabilitation ideals, as new emphasis is being placed on decarceration, reform, and evidence-based programming (Howell et al., 2013). “A sea change is underway in our nation’s approach” (p.1) to juvenile offenders, proclaims a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013).

Two similar reform efforts are leading this change. The first is the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), which provides funding to jurisdictions seeking to implement a new model of juvenile justice—one that relies less on detention and more on interagency collaboration and evidence-based practices to increase system efficiency and effectiveness (Sherman, 2005). Among others, JDAI also promotes gender specific reform, the significance of which is evidenced by the current study’s findings. Gender specific reform encourages the implementation of practices that focus on girls’ strengths and, at the same time, acknowledges the tremendous impact that previous trauma and dysfunctional relationships have on girls’ potential to remain trouble-free. Jurisdictions that participate in JDAI report a significant reduction in detention as well as in offending rates (Sherman, 2005). Lower delinquency and recidivism have also been recorded in Missouri, where an alternative juvenile justice system has been in effect for quite some time (Mendel, 2010). The Missouri model employs evidence-based, innovative programing that is administered in small treatment facilities, as opposed to large training schools, by caring adults as opposed to correctional officers. Although it has not yet been widely implemented outside Missouri, this model has, nevertheless, recently received the positive attention of media and policy makers alike in several jurisdictions across the country (Mendel, 2010).

The findings in this research highlight the need for several reforms. Similarly to JDAI and the bulk of feminist literature, it also highlights the need to educate probation workers on gender specific issues, especially on the prevalence of trauma in young females’ lives (HRW & ACLU, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Paramore, 2001; Freitas & Chesney-Lind, 2001; Goodkind, 2005; Owen & Bloom, 1997; Schaffner, 2006). Training on how to handle sexual abuse survivors is imperative, as a large proportion of system-involved girls fit this profile (Acoca, 1998). In general, juvenile institutions that house female delinquents, even short term, would benefit from replacing deprivation with a trauma-informed approach. This approach requires universal acknowledgment of how pervasive and devastating traumatic experiences can be for female offenders’ lives and persistent implementation of therapeutic programs to heal them (Harris & Fallot, 2001). To alter the crime-control culture of youth correctional agencies, education and training must additionally stress the significance of relationships in girls’ lives. This paper aligns with Covington’s (2008) suggestion that criminal justice employees working with females must be introduced to the propositions of relational theory.

The findings from this study raise questions as to whether reforms are possible in the system that exists. Currently, there are indicators that such reforms may have had an effect on juvenile delinquency and detention rates: racial disparities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013) notwithstanding, the overall confinement rates for juveniles (both girls and boys) have been generally on decline. There are currently about 1,200 girls (a figure much smaller than in 2007) in California juvenile facilities at any given day (OJJDP, 2012). With the 2012 implementation of Juvenile Justice Realignment (see De Leon & Teji, 2012), the number of youth in secure confinement is expected to drop even lower in the near future, as counties will be forced to find less costly alternatives. There is reason to believe that reduced use of confinement results in lower...
delinquency (Feld, 1999). This belief is corroborated by the fact that parallel to these changes, overall juvenile offending rates have dropped and are currently at their lowest level since the early 1980s (Puzzanchera, 2013). This is true for the jurisdiction where the current research was conducted as well: According to the probation department which runs the facility under study, desistance rates for youth under county supervision exceeded 60% in 2012. It is unclear, however, which change came first and whether there is a cause and effect relationship between the two (meaning, there is no clear evidence that lower offending is the result of policy reform commitments, especially since crime rates in general have been dropping even in places where traditional/punitive justice models are still in effect). This is an empirical question that needs further investigation.

Most importantly, however, skepticism about the material effects of such reforms arises from qualitative research findings such as those discussed in the current paper. These findings indicate that top-down policy reforms, while necessary, might nevertheless be insufficient to overturn the collective ideology that prevails inside juvenile justice institutions. This same ideology prevents good intentions and well-designed, evidence-based practices to be truthfully implemented.

The county in which my research site is located is now one of the many who participate in JDAI. This is a positive development and a step toward the right direction. At the time of this research, the same agency had made a commitment to gender-specific programing as well, for which it had received federal funding. Despite good intentions and promising efforts by the agency’s top managers, however, my data suggest that this programing never managed to alter the punitive, repressive environment inside the institution’s units. Gender specific programing emphasizes empowerment, a goal that clashes with the restrictive correctional context in which it was supposed to materialize. Soon, the program became indistinguishable from other traditional types of counseling sessions (such as AA, and Bible study) that were offered here and there. That this program had no positive impact on conditions of confinement for girls in this institution raises concerns as to whether participation in JDAI and commitment to other evidence-based initiatives necessarily means that these commitments will realize. It seems unlikely without line counselors’ ideological commitment to treatment goals, which is necessary for them to accommodate programing, rather than expecting things to happen the other way around (meaning, rather than expecting programing adjustments that fit with correctional control goals). On the other hand, this skepticism is founded on data collected a few years ago. To determine whether promises made are indeed promises met, further research into juvenile justice institutions is necessary in the academic community.

Conclusion

As this Southern California illustration reveals, the system promotes a pretend regime of rehabilitation and innovation. Re-offending is consequently and conveniently attributed either to youths’ individual failure or to factors in the “outside” world. Through its endorsement of rehabilitation and empowerment, this regime eloquently masks the fact that it consistently attacks everything that we need to build on in order to help better system-involved girls’ lives: Personal efficacy, control, meaningful relationships, and confidence. Because these attacks are systematic rather than incidental, they need to be addressed not as isolated (even if frequent) events, but as acts deeply rooted in the system’s ideological foundations. Rather than solely arguing for removing most girls, unsuitable staff, or nonsensical rules from these institutions, I argue for a fundamental reform of the juvenile justice system that goes beyond paper to change not only the law, but also, the culture of penal control and disempowerment.

References


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### About the Author

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Endnotes

1 This is a quote from one of the study’s respondents, a 17-year-old detained girl, whom I will call “Brenda.” All names and identifiers have been changed to protect the participants’ anonymity.
2 This research design sought and received IRB approval by the University of California Committee on Human Subjects as well as by the Committee on Human Subjects of the County in which the facility where data were collected (the County name is not disclosed to ensure respondent confidentiality).
3 Excluding private facilities, although according to recent data, those are rarely used in California.
4 Whereas recent developments, such as outlawing death penalty and mandatory life without parole sentencing for minors and the adoption of promising juvenile justice reforms in several states, suggest that there may be a shift back to the welfare model, crime control policies still exist. A few examples include waivers, life sentences, and sex offender registries for minor offenders, policies arguably divergent from principles of rehabilitation and *parens patriae* on which the juvenile justice was conceptualized. If anything, one can argue that there are two contrasting parallel trends right now in juvenile justice policy: one punitive and a second one rehabilitative.
5 This quote is taken from the county’s website. A citation is purposefully omitted in an attempt to preserve as much anonymity as possible for study participants.
6 For a detailed discussion of respondents’ background and life stories, see Tosouni (2010).
7 “Going-off”—a frequent happening in the unit—refers to girls’ emotional and, at times, violent outbursts, such as screaming, yelling, banging one’s head on the wall, and similar behaviors.
8 Because this study was conducted inside the female unit, I am unable to draw conclusions regarding the conditions of confinement for male delinquents.
9 Gathering from the county’s official website, this participation started about the same time that my data collection concluded.