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The myth of girl gangs.

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Headlines about ‘girl gangs’ roaming the streets and randomly attacking innocent victims have been a recurring feature of the pages of our newspapers. In such reports, ‘girl violence’ has been presented as becoming commonplace. Yet the everyday experience of girls presents a very different picture of the nature and extent of violence in girls’ lives. Drawing on press coverage of a recent study of ‘ordinary’ girls’ views and experiences of violence, this article will examine the main differences between media and real life images of girls and violence.

What the research said

The girls and violence study was developed within the context of a perceived increase in violent and aggressive behaviour by girls, fuelled by considerable media attention. In spite of this attention, we knew very little about the nature and extent of violent behaviour by girls, or the impact of violence in their lives. There are several reasons for this lack of knowledge, but the main one is that violence is overwhelmingly committed by men. Violence by women is rare: in Scotland in 1998, only seven-and-a-half per cent of those found guilty of non-sexual crimes of violence were female (412 women) (Scottish Executive, 1999).

The findings from the girls and violence study support the view that violence by girls is *not* a major social problem. We found little evidence to suggest that girls are using physical violence to any great extent, since only a very small proportion of girls (5%) reported being routinely physically violent towards others. Perhaps most notably, we did not find any evidence of the existence of girl gangs. Not one of the 800 teenage girls that took part in the research claimed to be in a girl gang (see), nor did they know of anyone else who was a member. (Most researchers believe that a ‘gang’ must have a name, identifiable ‘colours’, a formal authority structure, and, perhaps most importantly, endurance over time. See Campbell, 1995, for further discussion.)

What our research did find was that girls’ ideas about ‘what counts’ as violence did not correspond with adult or legal views. A common understanding of violence is of an intentionally harmful, interpersonal physical act, such as punching or kicking. This was challenged by many of the girls that we spoke to, who maintained that verbal behaviours (such as name-calling, threats and intimidation) were often intended and experienced as potentially *more* hurtful and damaging than physical violence.

Girls also considered the context in which a particular act occurs as important. Physical fights between brothers and sisters within the home were not seen as ‘violent’ in the same way as fights taking place between other young people outside the home, no matter how serious. Such fighting (between siblings) was reported as a frequent occurrence, accounting for 59 per cent of the violence reported by girls.

Witnessing physical violence was another common experience. The vast majority of girls reported having witnessed some form of interpersonal physical violence at firsthand, and nearly two-thirds knew someone who had been hurt by physical

violence. In the majority of cases such incidents involved young people from their local neighbourhood.

What the papers said

Long before fieldwork began, the girls and violence study attracted an immense amount of media interest, and this continued throughout its duration. At times, we were fielding up to 25 media enquiries per week. Newsworthiness is the key to understanding the intensity of media coverage. British national newspapers have always looked towards crime, particularly violent crime, to generate a strong supply of 'good stories'. The problem is that much crime is mundane. Newspapers get round this problem by focusing on atypical and dramatic cases. 'Girl violence' is newsworthy because of the gender of the offender, not the crime she has committed. It epitomises everything that challenges the way in which 'nice girls' behave. This is in stark contrast to the presumed naturalness of men's aggression: nowhere is the violence of young men reported as 'boy violence'.

Press coverage consistently depicted the project as a study of violence developed in response to the 'problem' of violence by young women ('Concern at girls and violence - Study investigates female aggression', *The Herald*, 20/10/98). High profile cases were cited as evidence of a growing trend of girl thugs and these were spuriously linked to the research project ('Teen project looks at torture case', *Greenock Telegraph*, 4/5/98). Coverage of these cases typically consisted of a brief account of isolated incidents, with little or no detail or background information.

Following the launch of the findings, newspapers took a range of 'angles' on the key messages of the research. Some focused on girls' fear of sexual assault ('Girls live in fear of sexual attack', *The Herald*, 30/9/00), the impact of verbal abuse and fall outs between friends ('Girls fear losing their friends more than rape', *Sunday Herald*, 24/9/00), and girls' everyday experience of violence ('Violence is just a fact of life say teenage girls', *Daily Telegraph*, 7/10/00). It could be argued that these headlines broadly represent the key findings outlined above. However, a closer reading indicates an over-reliance on existing media templates (e.g. the threat of sexual violence and the escalation/normalisation of physical violence) and careless use of 'hard' quantitative data. For example, one report claimed that "four out of ten [girls] had been beaten up". Whilst our findings did report that 41 per cent of girls from the self-report survey had been the victim of physical violence, we were careful to explain that this meant they had been hit, kicked or punched by someone on at least one occasion. This finding has to be considered in light of the qualitative data, which suggests that the majority of such incidents occur between siblings in the home.

Newspaper reports also used horror stories and unusual case studies to illustrate the research findings. One newspaper claimed that "One girl she was too scared to leave the house for fear of being attacked. Another described how a girl gang member had held a knife to the throat of her best friend". Not only were these two incidents reported inaccurately (one girl told us she was afraid to leave the house for fear of being *sexually* attacked and another told us of a friend who had a knife held to *his* throat by another *young man*), they were atypical events and by no means represented the common experience of girls. This suggests a difficulty on the part of journalists,

who are working to tight deadlines and strict word limits, in engaging with crucial contextual information.

Another 'angle' adopted by the press involved misquoting the research to back up the girl gang story ('Deadly as the males - Experts probe explosion of violence by girl gangs', *Daily Record*, 30/9/00). The report appearing in the *Daily Record*, Scotland's biggest selling newspaper, claimed that: "The shocking extent of violence among teenage girls in Scotland was revealed yesterday. A study found girl gangs taking part in unprovoked attacks is now commonplace". The article went on to allege that "The number of violent crimes committed by girl thugs in Scotland has almost doubled in the last decade". Unsurprisingly, the reporter did not cite the source of this data. If we look at the official figures for the last eleven years (1987-1997), we can see that the number of women convicted of violent offending in Scotland *has* increased, but only by 15 per cent (that is, 38 additional cases). The comparable figure for men is an increase of 26 per cent (818) (Scottish Executive, letter, 21 April 1999). It is worth noting that, because the number of violent crimes committed by women is so low, a very small number of cases can make a great deal of difference in terms of percentage rises.

So what?

Whenever I tell people about the subject of my research, they virtually always respond with an urban myth about a friend of a friend who was the victim of a girl gang, or alternatively they put forward the 'common-sense' view that girls *are* becoming more violent. The main problem with misrepresenting the reality of girls' lives is that it can contribute to unrealistic public attitudes, which in turn can create misdirected public policy. The media fondness for relying on simplified statistics and atypical cases precludes any discussion of the complex socio-specific contexts of violence in girls' lives. As young women are demonised by the media, their genuine problems can be marginalised and ignored. Indeed, it is the girls who have become the problem.

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