

## ADOLESCENT FEMALE AGGRESSION

**Question:** Is the aggression of adolescent girls different from the aggression of adolescent boys?

**Background:** Fear of crime has considerable influence on the behaviour of people and the actions of governments. Citizens may curtail walking at night, add security alarms to their homes and avoid driving in certain areas. Governments improve policing and introduce interventions to reduce criminal behaviour. Fear of crime committed by youthful offenders is particularly high.

Even though the fear of crime is high, officially reported crime has actually been decreasing in recent years. Violent crime among young offenders in Canada has also decreased during the last five years. However, since 1995 violent crime among *female* youths has risen whereas the rate for male youths has fallen. While adolescent males continue to commit more crimes than adolescent females, the accelerated rate among adolescent females raises questions as to the cause and nature of this aggression-gender gap. Improved understanding of adolescent aggression, especially the aggressive acts committed by young women, would lead to more effective

policies and practices designed to reduce adolescent violence.

**Method:** A literature review on the prediction and assessment of aggression by girls between the ages of 12 to 17 was conducted. This age range defines the ages of young offenders in Canada. Forty-six studies published between 1991 and 1999 provided information on the factors associated with adolescent female aggression. This information was further grouped into eight categories (e.g., cognition, family, school, etc.). The studies were all published in English but reflected an international literature that included reports from diverse countries such as Finland and Australia.

**Answer:** From the literature review, it was apparent that the *form* of aggression can differ between boys and girls. Males are far more likely to engage in physical aggression than females. However, recent research has broadened the definition of aggression to include verbal threats and intimidation that is intended to disrupt social relationships. When threats and intimidation are considered, girls are found to be more aggressive than previously thought.

Moreover, evidence suggests the possibility that as some girls age, the form of aggression shifts from verbal threats and gossip intended to harm relationships to physical aggression.

Regardless of the form of aggression displayed, there is remarkable similarity in the factors associated with aggressive behaviour for males and females. For example, parental aggression, antisocial peers and behavioural and academic problems in school were all associated with aggressive behaviour among girls just as these variables are found related to violence among boys. There were also a few notable differences. Young, depressed women were nearly four times more likely to be aggressive and girls who were physically or sexually victimised were at a higher risk for violence.

#### Policy Implications:

1. Crime prevention and treatment programs need to be attentive to the different ways that young women

express aggressive behaviour. Targeting indirect, non-physical forms of aggressive behaviour may prevent direct, physical forms of violence.

2. Verbal aggression and intimidation among pre-adolescent girls may be helpful in identifying those who run the risk of developing into physically violent adolescents.
3. Interventions designed to prevent female adolescent violence should target not only factors associated with male adolescent violence but also depression and victimisation, factors specific to female aggression.

**Source:** Leschied, A., Cummings, A., Van Brunschot, M., Cunningham, A., & Saunders, A. (2000). *Female Adolescent Aggression: A Review of the Literature and the Correlates of Aggression* (User Report No. 2000-04). Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.

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