

Chapter 7

Gender Differences in the Educational Characteristics of Committed Youth

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Crime and delinquency have traditionally been more prevalent among young males; however, more recent evidence documents that the gender gap is narrowing. The national juvenile arrest rate for girls has increased 35% over the past two decades (Snyder, 2002). The Florida female commitment rate mirrors that of the nation. For example, between 1998 and 2004, admissions of males into the juvenile justice system decreased by 12%, while the number of girls increased by 10% (OPPAGA, 2005). Moreover, the number of girls in Florida's juvenile justice system has increased 5% from 2005 to 2006.

Despite the increase in the female delinquent population, girls remain a small proportion of the juvenile justice system population, and little is known about this subpopulation. This chapter seeks to add to the literature concerning females in the juvenile justice system by comparing them to males in terms of demography (including learning disabilities) and educational characteristics. This is important to better understand female delinquent youth and how programs can meet their needs.

One consequence of knowing little about female delinquent populations is that correctional facilities and programs for females have been plagued with inadequate funding and lack proper services (Kempf-Leonard and Sample, 2000). For example, the Florida Institute for Girls (FIG), intended to house the state's most violent female offenders, was investigated by a grand jury in 2003 for multiple incidences of sexual misconduct involving staff members and female committed youth, the improper use of restraining techniques, and the isolation of youth (keeping them out of school) for extended periods of time (Barton, 2003; Chapman, 2005). The grand jury found that the program "failed to provide adequate staffing and security," and it cited unequal pay compared to state workers. In 2004, a riot ensued during a football game. Three of the girls stripped themselves, and one resident threatened to hang herself with the flag from the game. Many of the committed youth became involved, resulting in 12 injured youths (Associated Press, 2004). Former Governor Jeb Bush closed the facility on October 1, 2005.

While FIG may be an extreme example, it is not the only program in Florida to experience difficulties in retaining staff and maintaining order. Girls' programs, in general, have consistently received average to low quality assurance performance scores in comparison to similar male facilities. Juvenile Justice Educational Enhancement Program (JJEEP) quality assurance reviewers have found instances in which discipline in girls' programs was lacking, creating an unsafe environment characterized by frequent fighting among the students and an ill-equipped staff. In 2005, the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Governmental Accountability (OPPAGA) conducted an evaluation of gender specific services in all female

residential programs in Florida and found that staff members in most programs were not trained to address gender-specific issues.

Despite the negligence in programs for females, there is a concomitant demand from federal and state policymakers to provide gender-specific services in juvenile justice facilities. In 1992, Congress made an additional requirement to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, specifying that states evaluate their services, including programs for girls. Additionally, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention instituted the challenge grant program for states to provide equal juvenile justice services to male and female youth (Kempf-Leonard and Sample, 2000).

In 2004, the Florida Legislature added a gender-specific component to juvenile justice programs. This bill (*Senate bill sb2732*) calls for equal protection for males and females, but recognizes gender-specific interests related to roles in society, access to resources, and social codes governing behavior. Also included in the bill is the direction that OPPAGA is to go in analyzing juvenile justice programs for girls and determining whether girls would be better served by less costly community-based programs.

While this legislation attempts to recognize the developmental differences between males and females, the research literature has not thoroughly explored this area for delinquent youth. Prior research has typically used the same risk assessments for both sexes, which implies that males and females are affected by the same risk factors in the same ways. More current research has found that males and females display certain mental and physical differences; however, the literature has not addressed the academic differences between male and female delinquents.

This chapter explores these educational characteristics as they vary between males and females. First, it addresses the literature on the differences in the risk factors between male and female delinquents. Second, it describes the demographic and educational differences of residentially-committed males and females prior to and during commitment. Finally, it addresses areas for future research on gender differences and recommendations for gender-specific services.

7.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, females have been left out of criminological research because they represent a small proportion of the criminal population. As their proportion increases in juvenile and adult systems, their presence cannot remain unnoticed. One of the main criticisms of the research to assess the differences between male and female delinquents—as well as between men and women in the adult correctional system—is that improper risk assessments have often been used.

In a study that surveyed administrators of state correctional facilities for females, Morash, Bynum, and Koons (1998) found that 39 states used the same risk assessment for males and females. The problem with using the same instrument is that the risk factors that lead females to commit crimes are frequently overshadowed by the male risk factors and the greater number of males in the sample. The conclusion that many of the risk factors that affect males seem to also affect females is simply an artifact of the risk assessment instrument (Gavezzi, et al., 2006; Kempf-Leonard and Sample, 2000).

Funk (1999) reviewed risk assessment instruments used for both males and females in the juvenile justice system and compared them to female-only risk assessment models. The male and female risk assessment models identified many similarities between males and females, such as:

- financial hardship,
- poor school behavior,
- age at first offense,
- placement in detention, and
- frequency of weighted prior offenses.

The larger male population in the combined sample, however, masked any potential differences. Using a female-only sample, the researcher found only one truly overlapping predictor of risk: placement in a detention facility.

Female juvenile delinquents are exposed to multiple risk factors that may prompt them to seize any number of the various opportunities for delinquency. The most consistent risk factor for female delinquents is that they tend to have a history of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Acoca and Dedel, 1998; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon, 1998; Funk, 1999; Gavezzi, et al., 2006; Kempf-Leonard and Sample, 2000). Researchers have consistently found that abuse or victimization is a risk factor that occurs more frequently for females than males. Acoca and Dedel found that “as many as 92% of girls in detention report having been victims of abuse” (1998). Furthermore, “girls are three times more likely to have been abused” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Victimization (for females) can manifest itself in multiple ways later in life, particularly in depression and substance abuse (Acoca, 1999).

Poor academic performance has also been found to be a significant predictor of delinquency in males and females (Maguin and Loeber, 1996). Specifically, delinquent youths have lower grade-point averages (GPAs) and are below grade level for their ages compared to their non-delinquent peers (Wang, Blomberg, and Li, 2005). These characteristics are often symptomatic of disabilities that interfere with their ability to learn (Zabel and Nigro, 2001). This can also inhibit their attachment to school and commitment to completing their education.

Although the literature speaks to a strong link between academic performance and delinquency, it rarely addresses the educational characteristics of male delinquents compared to female delinquents and whether academic performance is more likely to affect males than females. Ninety-one percent of the girls in the California Juvenile Justice system reported at least one measure of educational failure including suspension, expulsion, repeating grades, or being placed in a special classroom (Acoca and Dedel, 1998).

Additionally, many girls are truant (ABA-NBA, 2000). Girls in the Florida juvenile justice system who have academic problems were almost “four times more likely to be repeat offenders and nearly three times more likely to be a more serious offender” (Acoca, 1999: 5). Clearly, females are at risk for academic failure; however, Gavezzi et al. (2006) did not find any significant educational differences between males and females.

Lower academic performance among girls is thought to be the result of early adolescence. An early onset of puberty may foster body image issues, thus lowering their self-esteem and increasing their risk for depression. Females may start equal to males in terms of academic

standing; however, they are more susceptible to school failure in high school due to an increasing loss of self-esteem and confidence in their academic abilities (Acoca and Dedel, 1998; Bloom and Covington, 2000; Obeidallah and Earls, 1999).

Girls differ developmentally from males in that they depend more on establishing connections with and having concern for others (Gilligan, 1982). This becomes particularly important in explaining their academic performance. Girls who experience academic failure are often detached from school and their teachers. The drop in self-esteem is only compounded by the fact that school administrators and teachers are often not addressing females' academic and emotional needs.

For girls, academic performance is tied to their relationships with their teachers (American Association of University Women, 1992). In a study conducted by Simkins, Hirsch, McNamara, and Moss (2004), many of the girls in their sample felt that no one in school was paying attention to them. In another study, female delinquents left school because they were bored and could not get along with their teachers (ABA and NBA, 2001).

The frequent abuse that delinquent girls are exposed to may also contribute to their academic performance. Problems at home interfere with their ability to function at school. In addition, because of their concern for others, many girls skip school to take care of their families. Thus, their academic performance suffers (Simkins, et al., 2004).

Motivation and performance have also been cited as ways in which males and females differ in their levels of academic attainment. Girls' motivation is higher than that of boys prior to puberty and during the elementary school years. As the competition increases with each new grade level, females' motivation and performance drop. Girls work more effectively in groups, and the individualistic atmosphere of junior high and high school "works against their strengths" (Mickelson, 1989: 49).

As the gender gap for juvenile delinquency narrows, it is becoming more important to examine the risk factors that contribute to female delinquency. Moreover, it should be established which risk factors differ from those of males. Assessments that include gendered questions do reveal that females are more affected by mental and physical abuse. Less is known, however, about the academic differences between male and female juvenile delinquents. Poor academic performance is a risk factor for both sexes, but the different pathways that result in academic failure are still unclear.

7.3 THE EDUCATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MALE AND FEMALE RESIDENTIALLY COMMITTED YOUTHS

The current section compares the demographic and educational characteristics of the 12,766 male and female delinquents who entered a Florida juvenile justice residential program in the 2002-2003 fiscal year with no prior commitment in 2001-2002. This analysis includes demographic information (age, race, and prevalence of disabilities), educational data prior to commitment (enrollment, attendance record, GPA, and age/grade level), and credits and diplomas earned during commitment.

Table 7.3-1 presents the age distribution by gender of all (12,766) residentially-committed youths in a Florida juvenile justice residential program from 2002-2003.

TABLE 7.3-1
Ages of Male and Female Youths Committed in 2002-2003

	Male	Female	Total
Age	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
7 – 10	42 (1)	3 (1)	45 (1)
11 – 13	1,140 (11)	331 (15)	1,471 (12)
14	1,401 (13)	442 (20)	1,843 (14)
15	2,095 (20)	518 (23)	2,613 (20)
16	2,700 (26)	499 (22)	3,199 (25)
17	2,244 (21)	347 (15)	2,591 (20)
18 – 20	889 (8)	115 (5)	1,004 (8)
TOTAL	10,511 (100%)	2,255 (101%)	12,766 (100%)

Note: Column percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Most juvenile offenders (79%) in residential programs are between the ages of 14 and 17, with the greatest proportion (25%) being 16 years old. The greatest portion of male offenders are 16 years old, followed by those 17 and then 15 years old. The greatest portion of female offenders are 15 years old, followed by those 16 and then 14 years old.

The age distributions between genders are similar in shape, but show female offenders in residential programs to be slightly younger than their male counterparts. This finding is consistent with other research that indicates female delinquents are generally younger than males because of an earlier onset of puberty, which contributes to their drop in self-esteem and subsequent delinquent behavior.

Table 7.3-2 presents the racial distribution of the same sample of students.

TABLE 7.3-2
Races of Male and Female Youths Committed in 2002-2003

	Male	Female	Total
Race	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Black-Non Hispanic	4,713 (45)	920 (41)	5,633 (44)
White-Non Hispanic	4,855 (46)	1163 (52)	6,018 (47)
Hispanic	775 (7)	131 (6)	906 (7)
Other	168 (2)	41 (2)	209 (2)
TOTAL	10,511 (100%)	2,255 (101%)	12,766 (100%)

Note: Column percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Table 7.3-2 demonstrates that youth committed in residential programs are more likely to be White (47%) than Black (44%), while Hispanic students comprise only 7% of this population. Males are equally as likely to be White as Black, while female students are more likely to be White (52% compared to 41%).

Table 7.3-3 presents data for the 6,184 (48% of all newly committed juveniles) who have categorical learning disabilities.

TABLE 7.3-3
Disabilities of Youths Committed in 2002-2003

Disability	Male	Female	Total
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Mentally Handicapped	412 (8%)	70 (9%)	482 (8%)
Speech or Language Impaired	97 (2%)	33 (4%)	130 (2%)
Emotional or Behavior Disorders	2,600 (48%)	387 (48%)	2,987 (48%)
Specific Learning Disabled	2,014 (37%)	237 (30%)	2,251 (36%)
Other Health Impaired	82 (2%)	18 (2%)	100 (2%)
Other	181 (3%)	53 (7%)	234 (4%)
TOTAL	5,386 (100%)	798 (100%)	6,184 (100%)

Note: "Other" includes Hospital or Homebound, Deaf or Hard of Hearing, Visually Impaired, Traumatic Brain Injured, and Orthopedically Impaired.

Almost half (48%) of all students committed in juvenile justice residential facilities in Florida have some sort of disability. There is a significant difference in the number of girls (one third or 35%) who have some sort of disability and the number of boys (roughly half or 51%) who have a disability among residentially committed youth.

Forty-eight percent of the 6,184 students with disabilities have an emotional or behavior disorder, which is equally as likely for males as for females. More than a third of the committed youth with disabilities are specific learning disabled (36%). There are minimal differences for each disability between males and females, with males being slightly more likely to be specific learning disabled (37% compared to 30%). For information on disabilities and juvenile justice students, not limited to residential facilities, see chapter 2.

The following two tables report on juvenile justice residentially-committed youth who were enrolled in school for some part of the two semesters prior to their commitment. Students with a commitment during the two semesters prior to their commitment were excluded from this analysis.

Table 7.3-4 shows enrollment in a public school in number of days for males and females, and Table 7.3-5 shows the percentage of days male and female students were absent from school, excluding those students who were enrolled fewer than 30 days.

TABLE 7.3-4
Public School Enrollment for Males and Females Prior to Commitment

Number of Days	Male	Female	Total
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
0 - 29	981 (24)	252 (25)	1,233 (24)
30 - 59	690 (17)	182 (18)	872 (17)
60 - 89	553 (13)	135 (13)	688 (13)
90 - 119	488 (12)	103 (10)	591 (12)
120 - 149	374 (9)	109 (11)	483 (9)
150 - 179	548 (13)	132 (13)	680 (13)
180 - 209	389 (9)	81 (8)	470 (9)
210 or more	86 (2)	17 (2)	103 (2)
TOTAL	4,109 (100%)	1,011 (100%)	5,120 (100%)

One fourth of all students enrolled for some part of the two semesters prior to their commitment were enrolled fewer than 30 days. More than half (55%) were enrolled fewer than 90 days. There is no significant difference between genders for number of days enrolled in public school prior to commitment.

The following table compares the absentee rates of students in the previous table, which includes all students enrolled in public school for some part of the two semesters prior to their commitment. However, in Table 7.3-5, students enrolled fewer than 30 days were excluded from the analysis, resulting in 3,887 of the 5,120 students included in Table 7.3-4.

TABLE 7.3-5
Absentee Rates Prior to Commitment

	Male	Female	Total
Percent Days Absent	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
0%	492 (16)	97 (13)	589 (15)
1 – 10%	679 (22)	170 (22)	849 (22)
11 – 20%	646 (21)	152 (20)	798 (21)
21 – 30%	501 (16)	121 (16)	622 (16)
31 – 40%	347 (11)	90 (12)	437 (11)
41 – 50%	196 (6)	52 (7)	248 (6)
51 – 60%	133 (4)	30 (4)	163 (4)
61 – 70%	70 (2)	24 (3)	94 (2)
71 – 80%	35 (1)	17 (2)	52 (1)
81 – 90%	26 (1)	5 (1)	31 (1)
91 – 100%	3 (0)	1 (0)	4 (0)
TOTAL	3,128 (100%)	759 (100%)	3,887 (100%)

Table 7.3-5 displays the percent of days absent from public school for the 3,887 students who were enrolled for more than 30 days in the two semesters prior to their commitment. The largest category (38%) of youth was absent less than 10% of days of their enrollment. One fourth of the youth were absent for more than 30% of their enrollment period in their public school prior to commitment. There are no significant differences in absentee rates prior to commitment between males and females; they are equally likely to be absent from school.

Table 7.3-6 compares the GPAs of males and females prior to commitment. This analysis includes the juvenile justice residential inmates who were enrolled in public school for some part of the two semesters prior to commitment (5,120). GPA data were missing for 2,500 students, resulting in a sample of 2,620.

TABLE 7.3-6
GPA of Males and Females Prior to Commitment

	Male	Female	Total
GPA	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
0-.99	632 (30)	150 (30)	782 (30)
1-1.99	814 (39)	171 (34)	985 (38)
2-2.99	533 (25)	134 (27)	667 (26)
3 and above	135 (6)	51 (10)	186 (7)
TOTAL	2,114 (101%)	506 (101%)	2,620 (101%)

Note: Column percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$) between males and females in GPA prior to commitment. Females in this sample tend to have higher GPAs than their male counterparts. While males and females are equally likely to have a GPA of less than 1.0 (30%), a greater proportion of females entered residential facilities with GPAs of 2.0 or above. Females were more likely to have a 3.0 and above (10% compared to 6%), which is consistent with the literature that finds females' academic performance to be better than that of males.

Table 7.3-7 presents the percentage of males and females on or above grade level and below grade level for their ages. This data is representative of the sample of 6,863 of all students committed in a Florida juvenile justice residential program in 2002-2003 for whom age/grade level data were available from their prior public schools (54% of the total number of students).

TABLE 7.3-7
Age/Grade Levels of Males and Females Prior to Commitment

	Male	Female	Total
Age/Grade level	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
At grade level or above	1,220 (22)	380 (29)	1,600 (23)
1 level below	1,908 (34)	504 (38)	2,412 (35)
2 levels below	1,528 (28)	309 (23)	1,837 (27)
3 or more levels below	886 (16)	128 (10)	1,014 (15)
TOTAL	5,542 (100%)	1,321 (100%)	6,863 (100%)

Overall, the majority (77%) of juvenile justice residential youths are below the appropriate grade levels for their ages, while 42% are two or more grade levels behind. Only 23% of these students are on or above their age-appropriate grade levels.

Chi-square analysis revealed that there is a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) between males and females concerning age/grade level. A greater percentage of females are on grade level or above (29% compared to 22%), and significantly more males are one or more grade levels below that which is appropriate for their age (78% compared to 71%).

Tables 7.3-8 and 7.3-9 compare academic performance measures of males and females during their residential commitment. Table 7.3-8 presents the total credits earned by males and

females in a Florida juvenile justice residential program during their 2002-2003 stay. The table is further divided into core academic, career/technical, and elective credits. Credits earned by all (12,766) students were included in this analysis.

TABLE 7.3-8
Credits Earned by Males and Females During 2002-2003 Commitment

	Male	Female	Total
Credited Courses	n (%)	N (%)	n (%)
Core Academic	3,772 (52)	702 (52)	4,473 (52)
Career/Technical	845 (12)	82 (6)	927 (11)
Elective	2,649 (36)	569 (42)	3,218 (37)
TOTAL	7,266 (100%)	1,352 (100%)	8,618 (100%)

In general, juvenile justice youths earn more core academic credits (52% of their credits earned) than career/technical and elective credits combined. As a whole, these students earned 1.49 credits per student during their commitment. However, considering the number of male (10,511) and female (2,255) students, females earned slightly more credits per student than did males (1.7 compared to 1.4) during their residential stay in 2002-2003.

Chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) between males and females for type of credits earned. Among males and females, more than half (52%) of the credits earned are for core academic courses. A greater percentage of credits earned by males are for career/technical courses (12% compared to 6% for females), while a greater percentage of credits earned by females are for elective courses (42% compared to 36% for males).

It is unclear from this data whether females simply earn fewer career/technical credits or are offered fewer career/technical courses in favor of electives. The literature finds that males are offered more opportunities in career/technical training, whereas females are provided with stereotypically “feminine” course work (Gelsthorpe, 1989 cited in Kempf-Leonard and Sample, 2000). An evaluation of gender specific programming in Florida’s juvenile residential programs revealed that females were offered far fewer career options than males (OPPAGA, 2005). Considering gender-specific programming, it will be important to increase the number of career/technical courses offered to females and to encourage females to complete career/technical coursework in order to provide them with skills for future employment.

Table 7.3-9 presents the diplomas earned during commitment in a juvenile justice residential facility for the 2002-2003 fiscal year. The diploma categories represented in this table are: standard high school, special, and General Educational Development (GED). This data is then considered in light of all juvenile justice youth 16 years and older.

TABLE 7.3-9
Diplomas Earned by Males and Females During 2002-2003 Commitment

	Male	Female	Total
Type of Diploma	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Standard	276 (34)	25 (48)	301 (35)
Special	71 (9)	1 (2)	72 (8)
GED	454 (57)	26 (50)	480 (56)
TOTAL	801 (100%)	52 (100%)	853 (99%)

Note: Column percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Of the 853 diplomas earned in a juvenile justice residential facilities in the 2002-2003 school year, more than half (56%) were GED diplomas, 35% were standard high school diplomas, and 8% were special diplomas. In 2002-2003 there were 6,801 youths who were 16 years old or older and, thus, eligible for at least a GED diploma. Of these, 961 were female and 5,840 were male. Considering this distribution, 5% of eligible females earned a GED diploma compared to 14% of eligible males.

Females were more likely to earn a standard diploma than males (48% compared to 24%), while males were more likely to earn special diplomas (9% compared to 2%) or GED diplomas (57% compared to 50%).

7.4 SUMMARY DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings suggest that male and female juvenile delinquents exhibit a fairly significant difference in prior public school performance and credits and diplomas earned during their commitment. In addition, 51% of the male sample were found to have a disability compared to only 35% of the female sample.

Concerning performance in public schools prior to commitment, no significant differences were found in enrollment or absentee rates. However, females in residential programs had higher incoming GPAs than their male counterparts and were significantly more likely to be on or above their age-appropriate grade levels.

During commitment, females earned slightly more credits per student than did males. While males and females earned the same proportion of core academic credits, females earned significantly more elective credits than career/technical credits, while the opposite was true for males. It may not be that females are choosing elective courses over career/technical courses, but it may indicate a program deficiency whereby girls in residential programs are not offered career/technical courses to the same extent as males. As stated before, it will be important to increase the number of career/technical courses offered to females and to encourage females to complete career/technical course work in order to provide them with skills for future employment.

Females were less likely to earn a diploma during their commitment than males. For those who did earn diplomas, females were more likely to earn a standard diploma and less likely to earn a GED diploma than were males. The lower proportion of career/technical credits earned (or even offered) may reflect a program push for females to return to school or

graduate with a standard diploma, while males may be encouraged more to obtain a GED diploma and enter the workforce.

Although significant educational differences were found between male and female committed youth, this does not suggest that the academic performance of males and females is approached in the same way. Feminist scholars have critiqued prior research for an over-reliance on quantitative data that do not reveal the nuances of the lives that are being studied. A multimethod approach that incorporates quantitative and qualitative data will help to illustrate the differences in the pathways to their individual levels of academic attainment.

Individual characteristics play a strong role in the link between academic failure and delinquency; however, program level factors and how they influence individual level characteristics should be addressed by future research, as well. The fact that females received fewer diplomas than males points to the need for future research to investigate whether administrative decisions are pushing females in a different academic direction than males. Additionally, administrative decisions to provide dissimilar career/technical options for males and females limit employment opportunities for both sexes and reinforce gender stereotypes. Females may feel constrained by their employment options; thus, they find less meaning and become detached from school.

Negative school environment and limited resources available to programs can also foster delinquent behavior because students are not socially bonded to their peers and school staff. This is an increasingly important issue as all-female programs continue to suffer from financial and staffing problems; the literature shows that meaningful relationships are part of the successful development of females.

Evaluating the long-term benefits of gender-specific services is a critical next step in research in this area; however, there are limitations. While some of the literature has identified “best practices” in gender-specific services, there are no strict guidelines as to what gender-specific services entails. Another challenge is finding male and female programs with similar populations for comparison purposes. Because the nature of female offending is typically less serious than males, many females participate in day treatment programs, whereas males are housed in residential programs. Not all of the residential programs for females have incorporated gender-specific services, making it difficult to assess their effectiveness compared to programs for males.

Determining “what works” in corrections will be a continuous debate, but to date, gender-specific programming has hardly been introduced in the discussion. As policymakers implement more gender-specific programming, its effectiveness should be further examined and understood. First, however, there is still a great need for research that identifies the pathways that lead females to crime. When the causes of academic failure and delinquency of female youths are better understood, programs can effectively address those needs.

