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Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice 2010 8: 250
DOI: 10.1177/1541204010376319

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://yvj.sagepub.com/content/8/3/250
Urban African American Girls at Risk: An Exploratory Study of Service Needs and Provision

Sarah Jane Brubaker1 and Kristan C. Fox1

Abstract
Although much has been gained from efforts to document and improve upon race and gender bias within the juvenile justice system, research continues to overlook the importance of service provision, particularly in terms of race and gender differences and inequities. Research focusing on urban African American girls, in particular, remains sparse. This article contributes to these neglected areas by presenting findings from an exploratory, qualitative study of service providers in a southeastern city in the United States. The findings are based on providers’ perceptions of the major problems and needs of the African American girls they serve, as well as of the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges of the programs and services they provide.

Keywords
juvenile justice, girls, African American, services, urban

Researchers’ and policy makers’ interest in the equitable treatment of youth by the juvenile justice system has led them to examine a number of biases, including racism and disproportionate minority confinement (Bishop, 2005; Kempf-Leonard, 2007), as well as sexism through gender-biased treatment and programming (Belknap, 2001; Chesney-Lind, & Shelden, 2004; Leiber & Mack, 2003; Van Wormer & Bartollas, 2000). More recently, researchers have begun to look at the combined effects of race and gender, primarily in terms of decision making (Guevara, Herz, & Spohn, 2006; Leiber, Brubaker, & Fox, 2009). Although much has been gained from these efforts, research continues to overlook the importance of service provision, particularly in terms of race and gender differences. Research focusing on urban African American girls, for example, remains sparse. This article contributes to these neglected areas by presenting findings from an exploratory, qualitative study of service providers in a southeastern city in the United States, and their perceptions of the main problems and needs of the African American girls they serve, as well as of the programs and services they provide.

1Douglas L. Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Sarah Jane Brubaker, Douglas L. Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, Virginia Commonwealth University, 923 W. Franklin St., P. O. Box 842028, Richmond, VA 23284, USA.
Email: sbrubaker@vcu.edu
First, we provide a review of scholarship on gender and race differences in terms of the treatment needs of juveniles, with particular attention to African American girls, as well as scholarship on service provision by child welfare and juvenile justice agencies. We then further explore these issues from the perspectives of staff members from various agencies and organizations that serve African American girls who are involved, or at risk of being involved, in the juvenile justice system. We discuss findings based on interviews with service providers from juvenile justice, social services, and nonprofit organizations about their experiences serving this particular population of at-risk girls, and their experiences working with other agencies to address their needs.

Background

Research on girls and the juvenile justice system has focused on their treatment by and within the system, as well as factors that bring them into contact with the system (Bond-Maupin, Maupin, & Leisenring, 2002; Gaarder, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2004; Goodkind, 2005; Haney, 2004). In general, like boys in the system, girls who come into contact with juvenile justice tend to come from environments engulfed in poverty, unemployment, high-crime neighborhoods, and unstable families (Chauhan & Reppucci, 2009; Chesney-Lind, Shelden, & Joe, 1996; Fournier, Cousineau, & Hamel, 2004). Children of color are much more likely to live in these environments and are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. “While youth of color represent 34% of the nation’s population, they account for 67% of youth committed to public facilities” (Girls Incorporated, 2007, p. 3). In addition, “[y]outh of color, especially African Americans, are more likely to receive harsher treatment when involved in school discipline proceedings, child welfare cases, or the juvenile justice system” (Ross, 2009, p. 8). Research has also shown significant differential service involvement by race and gender (Burns et al., 2004; Garland & Besinger, 1997), where minority and female adolescents consistently receive fewer services (Kempf-Leonard & Sample, 2000).

More unique to girls are issues related to sexual assault and sexual risk that force them to run away from abuse, contribute to serious mental health and substance abuse problems, and place them under the scrutiny of authority figures, typically subjecting them to punitive responses to their violating gender expectations (Goodkind, Ng, & Sarri, 2006; Hoyt, 1998; Twedt, 2001; Upchurch, Aneshensel, Sucoff, & Levy-Storms, 1999; Dittus, Jaccard, & Gordon 1997; Belgrave, Van Oss Marin, & Chambers, 2000). Researchers continue to emphasize the importance of recognizing girls’ unique experiences and the contexts of their lives that shape their problems and delinquent behavior in ways that are different from those of boys.

Although less is known about race differences among girls, research suggests some important findings. For example, Holsinger and Holsinger (2005) found that African American girls were more likely than other girls to be involved in more serious crimes such as unprovoked assault, possession of a weapon, and starting fistfights. Chauhan and Reppucci (2009) also found that physical abuse by parents was related to violent behavior for White girls whereas witnessing violence was related to violent and delinquent behaviors for Black girls. There is also some indication of race differences in terms of how the system treats girls (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). For example, among girls, 7 of 10 cases involving White girls are dismissed, compared with only 3 of every 10 cases involving African American girls (Girls Incorporated, 2007, p. 3). Similarly, one study suggests that African American girls do not do as well as girls from other racial/ethnic groups in traditional or ethnic-specific probation services (Wolf, Graziano, & Hartney, 2009).

Clearly, the needs of African American girls who are at risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system are great and multifaceted, and they require systematic approaches to prevention and service delivery. African American girls bear the brunt of multiple systems of oppression—racism, sexism, and poverty—and among girls, are at greatest risk of entering the juvenile justice system, as well as being treated more harshly once in the system (Gaarder et al., 2004; Miller, 2008). As suggested by
Gaarder et al. (2004), “In an environment marked by scarce resources, gender and racial/ethnic stereotypes leave girls few options for treatment and services” (p. 547).

In the next section, we review some of the major issues identified in the literature as affecting girls at risk for entry into the juvenile justice system. These include physical and sexual abuse and risk, mental health and substance abuse, and family contexts.

**Physical and Sexual Abuse and Risk**

Numerous studies have found disproportionate rates of physical and sexual abuse among females in the juvenile justice system (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Gover, 2004; Twedt, 2001; Wyatt, Newcomb, & Riederle, 1993). For example, research by Chesney-Lind and Shelden (1992) has shown that between 40% and 73% of incarcerated girls have been abused, whereas roughly 5–45% of girls outside the juvenile justice system have experienced abuse (Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005; Wyatt et al., 1993). One recent report indicates that 54% of the girls in juvenile correctional facilities had been sexually abused (Girls Incorporated, 2007). Girls who have been sexually abused have been found to have the highest rates of depression as well (Gover, 2004). Researchers suggest strong links between violent victimization and high-risk behaviors such as drug use, school failure, and gang membership (Acoca, 1998; Siegel & Williams, 2003). Very little research has examined potential race differences among girls’ sexual victimization but Smith and Ireland (2005) and Giardino and Giardino (2008) report no race differences in terms of children’s sexual victimization or girls’ sexual victimization, respectively.

**Mental Health and Substance Abuse**

According to a 2009 New York Times article, “About two-thirds of the nation’s juvenile inmates—who numbered 92,854 in 2006, down from 107,000 in 1999—have at least one mental illness, according to surveys of youth prisons, and are more in need of therapy than punishment” (Moore, 2009). Similar to issues of sexual assault, mental health issues differ by gender, and in addition, by race. For example, a higher percentage of girls than boys in the juvenile justice system experience mental health problems (Twedt, 2001), one national study finding that almost three quarters of girls in juvenile detention have at least one psychiatric disorder, compared with two thirds of detained boys and 15% of youth in the general population (National Institutes of Health, 2002). Girls may be just as likely as boys to need special education services as well, but they are less likely to receive them (Arms, Bickett, & Graf, 2008). Some researchers have suggested that the increased violent behavior attributed to girls is a result of their mental health problems (Twedt, 2001). In terms of race, multiple studies suggest that White adolescents are more likely than adolescents of color to experience substance abuse, yet African American youth are more likely to be arrested for drug-related crimes and to be depicted by the media as abusing drugs (Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005). Of particular interest to our study is that African American girls have been found to receive less attention and treatment for mental disorders than do White girls (Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005).

**Family Contexts**

Given its historical role in assisting families, the juvenile justice system is necessarily concerned with the family environment of its client. Research suggests that families of girls in the juvenile justice system have been found to be more dysfunctional than families of boys, and girls’ families are often characterized by a high degree of mother–daughter conflict (American Bar Association and National Bar Association, 2001). As suggested by the American Bar Association and National Bar Association (2001), “Young girls facing family fragmentation, victimization and abuse, serious
physical and mental health disorders, school failure, and conflicted relationships need the help of their communities to move beyond their chaotic histories and enable them to succeed” (p. 8).

At the same time that families face multiple challenges, they also often come into conflict with the juvenile justice and social service systems that they turn to for help. In one study of families of children in the juvenile justice system, “[m]any participants indicated that the burden placed on families is magnified by the lack of collaboration and communication between the mental health, juvenile justice, and school systems” (Regional Research Institute for Human Services, 2006, p. 22).

The intersection of family issues with various systems including social service, educational, and juvenile justice further necessitates and complicates collaboration across systems. Although as demonstrated above, little scholarly attention has been devoted to the unique experiences of African American girls that put them at risk, an examination of literature addressing race and gender issues more broadly suggests that the juvenile justice system alone cannot effectively address the myriad and interrelated risk factors and problems faced by African American girls. The complexity of the issues, needs for specialized services, limited resources, and turf battles also require that these girls must be able to connect with multiple agencies and systems to access the services they need, and that ultimately, those systems need to engage in various levels of collaboration. According to the ABA and NBA (2001):

Most girls in the justice system also have been involved in the dependency, special education and/or mental health systems. Disposition planning and access to gender-specific services require collaboration with related state and county systems and community based programs providing services for girls that are not available in the justice system. Access to those gender-specific services requires greater cross-system integration than is currently the rule, development of collaborative approaches between levels and branches of government (i.e. delinquency agency and judiciary, state and county), as well as development of advocacy practices for programs and attorneys representing girls in the system (2001, p. 24).

In the next section, we discuss conceptual frameworks on collaborative approaches to child welfare, as well as race and class issues shaping the urban environments in which African American girls at risk both face unique challenges and seek services.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

**Service Provision Through Collaboration**

Child welfare advocates and scholars in criminal justice and social work have recognized the importance of and challenges to interagency collaboration when addressing children’s problems and needs. The conditions of at-risk children’s lives often bring them into contact with a host of social service agencies that provide services, but the fragmentation of such services continues to pose a major challenge to comprehensive positive change in their lives (Lewandowski & GlenMaye, 2002; Rivard, Johnsen, Morrissey, & Starrett, 1999; Ross, 2009).

Whether they are referred to as interagency collaborations (Postmus & Hahn, 2007), systems of care (Anderson, 2000; Rivard et al., 1999), or wraparound services (Harvey, 1995), these approaches have been shown to be characterized by similar elements of success and types of challenges. For example, successful collaborations maximize exchange of resources (Rivard et al., 1999), emphasize community-based rather than institutional care (Rivard et al., 1999), and incorporate team approaches that emphasize role clarity (Lewandowski & GlenMaye, 2002), respect for different professional philosophies and identities and processes, cohesion, common and shared goals and values (Walter & Petr, 2000), and communication (Anderson, 2000). Additional factors contributing to
successful collaboration often include public/private partnerships (Lewandowski & GlenMaye, 2002), flexible funding (Anderson, 2000), and individualization of services.

Ross (2009) identifies multiple “cross-cutting problems” of collaboration that include multiple stakeholders competing for scarce resources, culture clashes, high turnover, ever-changing and complicated policies, rules, and regulations. Additional common barriers to collaboration cited by researchers include eligibility criteria, funding, time, and resources (Harvey, 1995). Ross (2009) also suggests that often each agency operates in isolation from others. “This isolation occurs in part because frontline workers are frequently unaware that their clients are involved in other systems, uninformed about how to communicate with other agencies, and unclear about their roles with respect to other agencies” (Ross, 2009, p. 173).

Social Isolation and the Underclass

What often goes unaddressed in studies of agency collaboration is the nature of the environment in which service provision takes place. Critical to a better understanding of service provision to urban African American girls is attention to this context. As Wilson (1987, 1991) has demonstrated through his structural model of social isolation, inner cities have become the “underclass” as a result of labor market conditions, demographic changes, racial discrimination, and racial segregation. As service industry has replaced production-based industry in the inner cities, those who could do so have left the cities, and those who could not have remained, resulting in a concentration of poverty, increased joblessness and welfare dependency.

The social disorganization of poor, inner-city communities leads to fewer institutional resources than are available in more affluent areas. With more disadvantage, residents are less likely to come to each other’s aid, especially in times of financial need. Compounding this situation, there has been historical disinvestment in the African American community (Massey & Denton, 1993). Declining public resources led to little political power within these communities. Local institutions collapsed . . . (De Marco & De Marco, 2009, p. 145).

These conditions not only limit the educational, social, health care, and other economically driven opportunities of African American youth, they also place the greatest demands on the agencies and organizations that serve inner-city populations.

These conceptual frameworks regarding collaboration and inner-city racism and poverty provide a framework for our analysis of the interview data presented below, contextualized by the literature on race and gender influences on juvenile justice involvement that constrain the experiences and options of both African American girls and the service providers and systems with which they engage.

Method

The data for this study were collected through face-to-face interviews with service providers in the city’s juvenile justice and social service agencies, and nonprofit agencies. The authors recruited participants through an informal group of service providers from all three types of agencies who work with girls in the city that has been meeting on a monthly basis for the past year, as well as through administrators at the agencies whose names were provided through the group. This group was formed by a Department of Social Services (DSS) attorney, a retired juvenile justice judge, and the first author, all of whom are interested in the plight of urban, African American girls at risk. One of the group’s goals was to gain a better understanding of the services and programs that are available to girls in the city and the extent of collaboration across providers.
A total of 20 individuals were interviewed, representing 10 agencies and organizations, by one or both of the authors. Interviews lasted between 25 and 60 min and all were tape-recorded and transcribed, with the exception of those with juvenile justice employees; the Department of Juvenile Justice Services (DJJS) did not grant approval for tape recording. Of the 20 interviewees, 18 were female and 2 were male; 6 females were Caucasian, and the remaining participants were African American. Job titles included social work specialist, case manager, probation officer (PO), parole officer, and director. To protect interviewees’ anonymity, we do not report the job titles together with the agency/organization.

The study was exploratory and designed primarily to gain more insight into the problems girls in the city and their caregivers are facing, the services and programs available to them, and the extent of collaboration among providers. The authors attempted to include a wide variety of service providers and agencies, including individuals from multiple occupational roles and levels, with various responsibilities, from the social service and juvenile justice agencies, as well as nonprofit organizations.

Most of the individuals who participated in the interviews work for agencies and organizations that serve both boys and girls but we asked them to focus primarily on the girls in their responses. We asked respondents to describe the demographic characteristics of the clients they served. Overwhelmingly, the majority of clients in this city are African American. According to a report on the city’s public schools systems, 91% of the student body is African American, 7% Caucasian, and 2% other races (Richmond City Public Schools, 2008). Consistent with these data, interviewees estimated that between 85% and 99% of their clientele are African American. Interviewees also described the majority of their clientele as poor, based on the observations that most receive Medicaid and free school lunches (80% according to the city’s public schools (Richmond City Public Schools, 2008); 32% of children of ages 0–17 in the city are designated as poor (Kids Count Data Center, 2008). This homogeneity prevented the respondents or the authors from making comparisons by race or class. The findings should be interpreted as representing the respondents’ perceptions of the experiences of poor, urban, African American girls, and their caregivers.

Following the steps of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), both authors used open coding of the transcribed interviews and interview notes for major themes related to the research questions. We then looked for similarities and differences by type of organization.

Findings

In this section, we present the findings of the study. First, we focus on respondents’ perceptions of the problems and needs of African American girls and their caregivers.

Problems and Needs of African American Girls and Their Caregivers

One of the first questions we asked providers was to describe the types of problems that African American girls and their caregivers were dealing with when they came into contact with them. Consistent with the literature on African American girls at risk, the main problems included academic problems/truancy, mental health issues, sexual victimization/sexual promiscuity, dangerous neighborhoods, increased aggression/fighting, and interactions with boyfriends who engaged in criminal activity. Many also mentioned family instability. Several providers noted that many of the girls they serve not only live without both biological parents, many live with neither; rather they live in foster homes, with friends, or extended family. Respondents estimated that between 20% and 50% of their caseloads of girls were residing with someone besides a relative. According to the DSS’ report on foster care for the month in which the data were collected, the city accounted for 6% of the state’s foster care caseload. Although there were almost equal numbers of boys and girls in foster care, 88%
of children in foster care in the city were African American (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2009). As a consequence of these issues, many providers noted the serious problems of low self-esteem and self-confidence that African American girls experience.

Two major themes related to problems girls are dealing with that get them into trouble were that, on one hand, girls have become more aggressive and more involved in fighting and assaults, and on the other hand, that girls are often in the wrong place at the wrong time and get into trouble for going along with something their boyfriends are involved in. According to one respondent, “They’re just—I mean, not to be stereotypical, but they’re not ladylike, many of them, they’re just wild.” Another respondent offered, “A lot of the girls, they’re—they pick up robbery charges, not because they’re the person that’s actually, you know, robbing, but because they’re there. They’re a participant. They’re following along with what the boys do. Or they’re doing what the boys tell them to do.”

Judging from the caseloads of the juvenile justice staff we interviewed, girls are entering the system for lesser charges than are boys. For example, there were many fewer girls than boys in detention or on probation or parole. The three POs we interviewed reported caseloads with the following numbers of girls relative to boys: 8 of 30, 3 of 29, and 1 of 22. Two parole officers reported 3 girls and 1 girl of caseloads of 15 and 25, respectively. At the time of the interviews, 2 of the 40 children in detention were girls. Additionally, most of the girls who had been in detention recently were in DSS custody because they were chronic runaways, rather than because they had committed assaults or felonies.

Although some of the service providers, primarily those who worked for juvenile justice, complained about the lack of cooperation and other problems that girls’ caregivers brought to the table, sometimes identifying “poor parenting” as a problem they had to confront, the majority of respondents—particularly those from nonprofit agencies and social services—seemed to appreciate the fact that the caregivers themselves were attempting to overcome multiple challenges. Most providers described the families of girls they served as single/female-headed households with low incomes and few resources and high unemployment, living in dangerous neighborhoods without reliable transportation, and subjected to an inferior urban public school system. This combination of challenges often overwhelmed caregivers and made it difficult for them to navigate, understand, access, or appreciate the systems providing services. For example, one interviewee offered the following:

The caregivers, um, you know, they don’t have . . . money, um they don’t have knowledge. I think with all the children in the city, [The] city schools is a huge problem, it’s a huge issue. And parents just don’t know how to navigate through that school system. You know, I think a little knowledge on what an IEP [Individual Education Plan] is, that you do have rights to an IEP, that you don’t have to listen to what the school tells you, um, if you had a strong advocate who could go in and just make the schools do what the schools should be doing and teaching those children. Um, our parents have no knowledge of that, and they’re, they’re very scared because you’ve got probation officers saying “you’ve gotta’ do this.” You’ve got, you know, the teachers telling them . . . they’re getting social services, then they’ve got requirements from there, and so it’s like one more thing for them to do. And it’s often just too much on their plate.

Many interviewees emphasized that caregivers are often welcoming of assistance from providers in terms of learning how to communicate and interact with their daughters. One provider described how girls’ caregivers themselves often had experienced various types of trauma that they had not been able to cope with; several mentioned that caregivers are often dealing with substance abuse and mental health issues as well. Because of the overwhelming obstacles in their lives both caregivers and girls were described as fearful and distrustful of service providers and often uncomfortable in service settings.
We asked providers to describe both what they thought girls need, as well as what, if anything, girls themselves say they want. The literature suggests that girls have expressed needs regarding counseling for abuse, sex, sexuality education, and childbirth and parenting classes (Chesney-Lind, Morash, & Stevens, 2008). In their study of what girls in juvenile justice want, Holsinger, Belknap, and Sutherland (1999) found that a small percentage of the services that girls stated they needed were actually rendered. For example, 9% of girls actually received services to develop job and career skills, though 70% reported the need. Of the 64% that wanted to learn independent living skills, only 5% received help in this area. Finally, 54% stated they needed family counseling and general health education, though only 14% and 8%, respectively, received these services (Wolf et al., 2009, p. 296).

One social worker who was interviewed in our study brought up an important point about what girls want, stating, “I’ve never had a girl say to me ‘I wish we had this or I wish we had that.’ I don’t even know if they know how to articulate … sometimes you have to help them get it out there to even understand why something like this would be valuable.” For girls who are not exposed to many options or accustomed to making requests, it may be difficult for them to identify or articulate what they want.

Other interviewees were able to respond to the question about what girls have said they want. Interestingly, and consistent with the study by Garcia and Lane (in press), there was significant similarity among providers’ perceptions of what girls need and what they want. In particular, providers noted that girls need and want to feel safe, to have positive things to do, to interact with positive role models, job opportunities and training, and opportunities to leave their neighborhoods and city and experience other geographical areas. One provider’s observations about what girls need were particularly poignant:

Self-identity and self-awareness. Also, to broaden their horizons. To connect with the larger world. Feeling comfortable in their own skin, liking themselves. A can-do spirit, empowerment—“I can do things, I can engage.” Something that I’ve found lacking is being engaged in community services. Giving back and I think a lot of that giving back will help some of these other areas in their life. Developing skills and feeling that they have a sense of accomplishment and something they have to share.

When we asked them to comment specifically on any gender differences among youth that they had observed in terms of problems, needs, or services provided, respondents’ perceptions were mixed; some felt that girls were given more leniency and more chances and others felt that girls were treated more harshly. In fact, these mixed observations are consistent with the literature (for example, see Leiber et al., 2009; MacDonald & Chesney-Lind, 2001; Words & Bynum, 1995).

Some respondents commented that girls are harder to work with (Gaarder et al., 2004), but several commented that girls are more likely to engage with service providers and to benefit from programs and services when given the opportunity. For example, one PO stated that, “girls are more successful with classes, they complete tasks, they complete diversion more than boys.”

As reported above, some respondents noted girls’ increasing aggressive behavior. For example, one PO commented that, “some girls are rough, more aggressive than the boys; every girl on my caseload now has multiple simple assaults.” Some respondents also described why girls may be experiencing more behavioral problems. For example, one social worker noted that, “girls have more underlying issues—have been through a lot more than boys.” Another commented that girls have greater expectations to care for siblings, and these responsibilities can lead to truancy and poor academic performance. Boys, however, are allowed more freedom. Another respondent, a social worker, commented, “And it’s unfortunate ‘cause you have that generation of girls growing up and you have more girls and the boys are being treated differently. The boys are not being held that same exacting standard. And what’s that saying? They love their sons and raise their daughters.”
Overall, the problems, needs, and desires of African American girls and their caregivers were consistent with the literature and reflected a number of overlapping and interconnected issues. In the next section, we discuss the services that the agencies and organizations represented by our interviewees provide to African American girls in an attempt to meet some of those needs and address some of the problems.

Service Provision

Collectively, the agencies and organizations represented in the study provide a number of services to African American girls that run the gamut from individual/group/family counseling, pregnancy/sexually transmitted infections (STI) risk prevention, housing, parenting, anger management, independent living, substance abuse outpatient services, recreational activities, and vocational training. One parole officer suggested that for juveniles, there are over 100 vendors providing services in the state. No single agency can provide such a variety of services, however, and one PO suggested that although there are a lot of services available, they are usually only offered on a short-term basis and have various eligibility requirements. For example, many are not available to youth after they turn 18. Additionally and importantly, and in contrast to the ABA and NBA (2001) report, few programs and services are gender-specific, despite ample research suggesting the benefits to girls of such services (for example, see Chesney-Lind, 2001; Goodkind, 2005; and Zahn, Hawkins, Chiancone, & Whitworth, 2008).

Several respondents discussed gender differences in terms of service provision and programs. For example, one parole officer noted that there are no halfway houses in the city for girls, but there are some for boys. Similarly, girls’ group homes limit girls’ stay to 4 months, where the boys are allowed to stay for 6 months. Another PO described how, when girls first came to one of the correctional facilities, the staff treated them more harshly than necessary, unprepared and untrained for working with girls. “When girls first came to [this facility], from [a neighboring facility], it was a big change and they resisted; they were restrained physically, too harshly; the staff overdid it. They didn’t know how to work with girls. They need more training on working with girls.”

In response to our request to identify the primary strengths of their service provision across agencies organizations, interviewees praised their staff for high levels of commitment, dedication, and ability to relate to the clients they serve. Despite the overwhelming challenges agencies and organizations face in terms of providing services and addressing the myriad needs of their clients, they seem to be able to hire staff members who are committed to serving African American girls at risk. Although this could be a reflection of selection bias, that is, that those staff members who were willing to be interviewed were most dedicated to the issue, most of the interviewees praised their coworkers, and none criticized colleagues or supervisors.

For example, respondents from juvenile justice services offered these perceptions:

“We have a good team, people really invested in girls . . . I’m not sure why—girls have a lot more drama-type issues, they’re more emotional, more sensitive, like a flower you have to water and nurture . . . .”

“People on staff take a vested interest in girls, not the department as a whole.”

Whether, and the extent to which, staff members’ understanding of and commitment to African American girls helped them to meet their needs remains to be seen. Particularly given the enormous challenges of inner-city environments, the lack of gender-specific programs and services for girls, and the current economic crisis in the United States, service providers face overwhelming challenges.

Overall, the combined efforts of these agencies and organizations, the services they provide, and the dedication of their staff seem to offer promise to their clients. Their success in meeting the
unique needs of African American girls at risk in the city is less clear. In the next section, we examine the extent of collaboration among these agencies and organizations, barriers to collaboration, and suggestions for improvement.

**Collaboration**

A few of the respondents described collaborative efforts they and their agencies were involved in, both within and between agencies. Some of these efforts were more formalized than others. In terms of formal arrangements, the Community Services Board participates in what is known as FAPTs, that is, Family Assessment and Planning Teams. The DSS had also recently begun a new process called “Team Decision Making” or TDM. The social work specialist in charge of TDM explained it thus:

> Basically, when a child comes into care or a child is in jeopardy of foster care, or placement change, any imminent danger or risk to a child, we come together as a treatment team, if you will, of family members, community partners, whoever is familiar with the child, or wants to work with the child’s best interest, and come up with a plan. Whether that be placement options, whether that be support systems, whether that be services for the child. . . . This is a new process, so, across the board I’m working with uh foster care, CPS, stabilization, even some adoptive workers in follow-through and case management if need be.

In addition to these two formal “teams,” DSS also locates two social work specialists in the court services building to assist with CHINS (Child In Need of Services) cases with petitions for relief of custody and similar issues. Also on-site at Juvenile Justice Court Services are both a case manager and clinician from the Behavioral Health Authority, to assist with mental health issues.

There are two primary ways through which DSS works with DJJS. First, children who are in foster care, and for whom DSS serves as their legal guardian, can create charges, resulting in the PO contacting DSS. A second way is when children who are on a probation officer’s caseload present issues that need to be referred to DSS, such as abuse; in this case, the PO would contact Child Protective Services (CPS).

These formal collaboration efforts seem to occur on a small and specialized scale, rather than on a broader level that would be required to serve large numbers of girls. Next, we discuss some of the informal efforts to collaborate.

Respondents also described multiple ways that informal relationships and collaborations occur among various agencies and organizations. One respondent suggested that some collaboration has become more informal in that their agency now “refers out” for services rather than “contracting” with other agencies. This arrangement presumably requires less paperwork and fewer formal expectations.

The trend toward more informal collaboration is one indication of increased fragmentation of services. For example, one probation officer stated:

> The JJ department has taken a turn from the PO interacting in a hands-on/mentoring way to more referrals. There are just too many kids. We only have five minutes, then we do paperwork. There are increased caseloads, increased expectations, and standards in the CSU (court services unit) and they are stricter than those in DJJS overall.

Similarly, one of the respondents from the Community Services Board commented, “So when you ask about services, sometimes we have to piece it together in terms of recalling everything that we do.”

One of the factors influencing more informal networking and fragmentation of services seemed to be financial. With state agencies reeling from major budget cuts, they are being forced to scramble to find services where they can. One social worker suggested:
With the way things are going budget wise, we have been encouraged more so—we were doing it before—but to try and utilize community resources as much as possible. You network amongst each other to say like, I found out about this resource, they are really good, or something like that.

Relatedly, most of the agencies seemed to refer clients to free services and programs from nonprofit organizations like the Salvation Army Boys & Girls Club, Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), and local community organizations, as well as the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation. These collaborations were much less formal than referrals for mental health services or other fee-based services.

Not only can changes in formal structures and financial challenges contribute to informal networking and fragmented services, several respondents seemed to indicate that the best relationships among collaborators were formed through personal contacts. For example, one respondent suggested, “And then, if you’ve been around the city for a long time, sometimes you have—I have anyway—come in contact with some people who I know, who to call when I need something, help my staff to access those resources through getting information from those people.” Another made a similar observation, but also pointed out the downside to such informal networking, “Definitely we are working with personal relationships, so if you have a commitment to one agency and that person leaves, there goes that. It is so important to have a relationship on a higher level so it can trickle down to service providers.” Another respondent described the problem this way:

It sort of tends to fall to the individual workers’ connection with one another, and like with anything, it’s only as good as the folks who are on the front line, handling the calls, handling the youth, in terms of their own, personal sense of integrity if you will, of getting back to folks, of, you know, their idea of good collaboration.

Although respondents reported both formal and informal collaborative attempts and arrangements, they were largely fragmented and individualized across agencies. In addition to fragmentation, additional barriers to collaboration were identified and described by respondents. One barrier observed by a few respondents was that sometimes African American girls’ caregivers are unwilling to cooperate in collaborative efforts, preferring to deal with one agency at a time rather than be involved with multiple agencies. This was also related to the previously discussed issues of trust, knowledge about, and understanding of service options.

A few of the respondents also identified the Health Information Privacy Act (HIPA) and confidentiality rules as barriers to collaboration. They noted that being unable to share information across agencies often inhibited their ability to connect clients with additional services. Perhaps, the major barrier to collaboration mentioned by numerous respondents was funding. Each agency draws from unique funding streams, each with its own eligibility requirements. And as state agencies experience more budget cuts, the dwindling resources are harder to allocate widely. As noted by one respondent, “They are very particular about who’s paying for what because everyone is trying to maximize their dollars, which I understand.” Specific funding pools were available to specific agencies for particular categories of clients and types of needs, and it was clear that these funding issues were complicated and constantly changing, placing additional burdens on service providers.

The literature cites differing goals/missions and philosophies as an impediment to successful collaboration. Although few of the respondents reported this as an obstacle in their experiences, there did seem to be some conflict between juvenile justice and nonjustice agencies. Several respondents from social service, school, or nonprofit organizations were careful to state that they tried to avoid having to refer girls to the juvenile justice system, recognizing that they often were not treated fairly there, and/or that doing so could negatively affect their futures. A social work specialist explained:

We have a lot of social workers that complain that the POs, the probation officers, don’t call them back. Don’t follow up enough with the child, don’t want to keep the kid on probation even if we’re suggesting
that you know a tighter reign is in order. It’s just hard to understand what their services are. As a general rule, we don’t get a lot of cross-training from one agency to another. Every now and then, we will, but it really needs to be on a much more consistent and frequent basis so that we’re understanding what services are available to our youth should they become kids that are put on probation for whatever reason.

Some juvenile justice staff also shared complaints about social services. For example, a probation officer stated that “social services sometimes has conflicting ideas of what a youth needs. We will suggest an out-of-home placement and they want the youth in-home, to stay in the family.” Another probation officer offered, “Our relationship with social services can be confusing. There’s the question of who has custody. DSS only has them through age 18, then JJ has to find a placement.” Consistent with this observation is Ross’s (2009, p. 178) point that “For foster children, the locus of responsibility is often unclear to frontline staff, case managers, and foster parents.” Ross (2009) also points out that competing goals and philosophies of agencies that might collaborate can also lead to “tunnel problems,” a situation in which a youth’s entry point into a series of systems, rather than the youth’s underlying problems, often determines the response.

Consistent with the literature, respondents cited numerous barriers to successful collaboration. Funding constraints, confidentiality requirements, fragmentation of and lack of oversight of services, and competing philosophies/goals across agencies were reported as primary barriers to collaboration. In response to these barriers and other problems with service provision, respondents identified the need for expanded preventive and gender-specific programming and services, as well as cross-agency training. A few respondents also suggested that overall coordination was critical. One social work specialist commented, “I think it would be good if we had a listing of all the service providers and all the services they provide along with contact numbers, fees if applicable, what they would need to qualify. I think this would be helpful.” Related to overall coordination is intentional planning around coordination. Another respondent suggested that some kind of a “one-stop shop” would be helpful. “My dream is to have some physical housing facility for the various components that a youth would need.”

Almost all of the respondents identified increased funding as a major way to improve service provision and collaboration. This would facilitate improvements including more flexibility in creating services, more staff and resources, smaller caseloads, and shorter waiting lists. Suggestions for more informal improvements address ways that agencies might work within existing structures to focus their efforts differently. For example, respondents suggested that agencies put more effort into recruiting participants, gaining visibility in the community to gain trust, and striving for better communication to potential clients regarding the availability of services.

Discussion

It was not until its reauthorization in 1992 that the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJD) act began to address the needs of girls. Specifically, Congress prioritized two particular areas concerning females that were to be addressed by states: (a) adoption of policies and practices that would prohibit gender bias in the JJS and (b) development of programs for females that would give them access to a complete range of programming (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], 1998). In response to these policy changes, numerous researchers have set out to better document, understand, and explain the unique problems girls face both prior to and after entering the juvenile justice system. Although most researchers and policy makers acknowledge the importance of examining the contexts of girls’ lives, there is much work yet to be done. And there is a particular lack of attention to inner-city African American girls’ experiences, needs, and access to services.

Although significant research has focused on contextual issues in terms of race- and gender-related factors influencing decision making within the juvenile justice system, little research has
addressed the contexts of urban African American girls’ lives beyond and outside of specific agency responses, as well as before they come into contact with these systems. Research has established that girls are shortchanged by educational and juvenile justice systems, and that youth of color receive fewer educational and other services as well as harsher treatment by the juvenile justice system; the intersections of gender and race bias clearly create additional burdens and challenges for African American girls and the service providers who attempt to meet their needs. The findings of this study are consistent with the research indicating that girls’ needs include attention to sexual assault and its effects, such as mental health problems and running away from home, as well as attention to their family, neighborhood, and peer influences that threaten their autonomy and self-esteem. Girls’ experiences and needs are different from those of boys, and they require different types of programs and services. Because of institutionalized racism and living in urban environments, many African American girls also face unique problems that are different from those of Caucasian girls. Greater attention to the specific types of services African American girls need is warranted.

Collaborative efforts across agencies to provide African American girls with programs and services that prevent them from entering the system and that prevent reoffending is one way to address these contexts. Service providers working in inner-city environments plagued by limited resources, a lack of planning or formal structure in place to facilitate collaboration, and an absence of services and programs geared to girls in general and African American girls in particular face overwhelming obstacles to meeting these girls’ needs.

The data gleaned from interviews with service providers in this city suggest that inner-city agencies and organizations are facing major challenges, and continued budget cuts only threaten to make this situation worse. Although the service providers seem to reflect strengths in terms of staff dedication and informal efforts to collaborate, the overall absence of structured and planned collaboration with clear oversight and the lack of gender- and culturally-specific programming ultimately prevent widespread collaborative efforts across agencies to serve African American girls’ needs.

The exploratory nature of this study, and the small nonrepresentative sample are both limitations to this study. Recruiting from a group of providers already committed to girls is another potential limitation. Drawing on the perspectives of providers does provide insights into the daily processes that girls encounter, but future studies would benefit from drawing a broader and more representative sample of providers. Overall, much more attention needs to be given to examine how race and gender bias creates unique challenges to both clients and service providers, and ultimately, how greater commitment to collaboration can help to overcome these challenges.

Acknowledgments
The authors would like to thank Kristy King for her research assistance on this project. We also like to thank Michael Leiber and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The authors declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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Bios

Sarah Jane Brubaker is an associate professor and graduate coordinator of sociology in the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University. She conducts research in the areas of adolescent sexuality and pregnancy, especially among African American girls, girls and juvenile justice, and gender and medicalization. Her research has been published in the Journal of Marriage and Family, Gender & Society, and Feminist Criminology.

Kristan Fox, MPP, conducts research and teaches in the areas of gender and race and ethnicity issues pertinent to delinquency and juvenile justice, as well as crime control policies, including those in response to Mexican migration within the United States to new destinations.