



## SITUATIONS OF VIOLENCE IN THE LIVES OF GIRL GANG MEMBERS

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**Geoffrey Hunt**

Institute for Scientific Analysis, Alameda, California, USA

**Karen Joe-Laidler**

Department of Sociology, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, SAR of China

Women and violence has become a topic of increasing concern. Women's involvement in perpetrating violence, especially girl gang members, also has raised national concern. The participation of young women in gangs and gang violence has caused public consternation as they are perceived to be violating traditional notions of femininity. In spite of this increased concern and burgeoning literature, significant gaps still exist in our understanding of the role of young women in gangs, the nature and extent of female gang members' victimization, and the extent of their involvement in perpetrating violence. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of violence in the lives of female gang members.

The analysis draws from the qualitative and quantitative data of an ongoing comparative study on ethnic youth gangs in the San Francisco Bay Area. The analysis is organized around the situations of violence these young women face from early childhood within the family setting to their current status within the gang and on the streets.

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Address correspondence to Geoffrey Hunt, Institute for Scientific Analysis, 1150 Ballena Blvd, Suite 211, Alameda, CA 94501, USA. E-mail: huntgisa@ix.netcom.com

Over the last decade, public concern has risen over the problems of women as victims and offenders of violence. Justice and health agencies have initiated research and programs to address the issues associated with women and violence. The National Crime Victimization Survey found that 30.4 per 1,000 women had been victims of crimes of violence in 1998 (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2000a). Research on female violence over the last 20 years has shown that the “most common assailant is a man known to the woman, often her male intimate” (Crowell & Burgess, 1996, p. 29). An estimated 30% of all female murder victims are killed by intimate partners, a finding consistent since 1976 (BJS, 2000b). Intimate male-on-female victimization also predominates for both sexual and physical assault for African Americans, Hispanics, Whites, and urban and rural populations (BJS, 1999; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Crowell & Burgess, 1996). Women between the ages of 12 to 18 experience the highest rates of victimization, a characteristic that is true for homicides, sexual assaults, and intimate partner violence (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Reiss & Roth, 1993). The rates of victimization for crimes of violence among female juveniles differs as well. For 1998, the rate of violent victimization among 12- to 15-year-old females is 62.3 per 100,000; the rate among 16- to 19-year-old females is 72.6 per 100,000, and the rate among 20- to 24-year-old females is 59.0 per 100,000. These rates are significantly higher compared with adult females (the rate among 25- to 34-year-olds is 35.2 per 100,000). Among the highest risk of violent victimization (16- to 19-year-olds), the major forms of violent victimization include, in rank order, simple assault, attempted violence, and aggravated assault (BJS, 2000a). This group also had the highest rate of rape victimization in that year—10.0 per 100,000.

Although fewer studies have been conducted on violence against minority women, certain differences are discernible. African American women are more likely to report physical violence in intimate relationships than White (non-Hispanic) women (Asbury, 1987; Cazenave & Straus, 1990; Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Durant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, & Slavens, 1994; Sorenson, 1996; Straus & Gelles, 1986). Results from studies on Hispanic women and violence are inconclusive, with some of them reporting Hispanic women being at a higher risk of violence than non-Hispanics, while others report the risk to be lower or at the same level (Sorenson, 1996; Sorenson & Telles, 1991; Straus & Smith, 1990). Little or no survey data exist on violence against Asian American women (Ho, 1990). According to the National Violence Against Women Survey, however, Asian Pacific Americans reported significantly lower rates of personal violence than other ethnic groups. This finding is not necessarily linked to lower rates of violence in this group (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Instead, researchers suggest that Asian Pacific Ameri-

cans are highly resistant to reporting because of their strict adherence to traditional values, which emphasize personal sacrifice for family harmony and discourage disclosure of conflict and abuse in the family (Abraham, 2000; Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Lum, 1998).

Women's involvement in perpetrating violence also has raised national concern. According to self-reported victimization, females account for an estimated 14% of violent offenders, or an annual average of 2.1 million violent female offenders (BJS, 1999). Three out of four of violent victimizations committed by females were for simple assault (BJS, 1999). Slightly more than one-third of offenders were described by victims of violence as being Black, and 1 in 10 were described as being of another ethnic minority group. Based on victims' self reports, approximately 28% of violent female offenders are under the age of 21. This proportion is similar to that of male juvenile offenders (26% of all violent male offenders). According to arrests data, females accounted for 22% of all arrests in 1998, 17% of violent offences (including murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault), and 29% of property crimes. Juvenile females accounted for 22% of all female arrests. The arrest rates for violent offenses were higher for female juveniles at 126 per 100,000 compared with 91 per 100,000 for female adults (BJS, 1999).

These statistics highlight the extent to which young minority women are at risk for violence, both as victims and as perpetrators. One arena in which minority women appear particularly at risk is in gangs. Recently the increasing concern over their participation in gangs (Chesney-Lind, Shelden, & Joe, 1996) has focused primarily on assumptions of an increase in young minority women's membership in gangs and participation in violence. Although exact participation rates of female involvement in gangs, crime, and violence remain unknown, even less information is available about the nature and extent of female gang members' victimization.

Female gang participation has generated much public concern and media attention, in part because they are becoming more visible, and also because they are presumed to be rebelling against traditional notions of femininity. The popular image of female gang members portrays these "bad girls" as even more problematic than their male counterparts because they challenge traditional gender roles. Official estimates of the number of youth involved in gangs have increased dramatically over the past decade. Currently, more than 90% of the nation's largest cities report youth gang problems, an increase from about half in 1983, and police estimates now put the number of gangs at 4,881 and the number of gang members at approximately 249,324 (Chesney-Lind, Shelden, & Joe, 1996; Curry, Ball, & Fox, 1994). Recent studies have noted that girl gang membership is also increasing (Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993; Fagan, 1990a; Winfree

et al., 1992). Female membership in gangs is estimated to be between 10% to 30% of all gang members (Campbell, 1984; Chesney-Lind, 1993; Curry, Ball, & Fox, 1994; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1990b; Klein, 1995; Moore, 1991), figures much higher than those supplied by official data.

Despite a shift in interest from what Inciardi, Horowitz, and Pottieger (1993) have called the "garden variety" delinquent to that of the serious delinquent (Horowitz, 1990), researchers traditionally have neglected or downplayed the roles that females play in street gangs as well as the social processes and consequences of their involvement in gangs.<sup>1</sup> Male gang researchers traditionally characterized female members as maladjusted tomboys or sexual deviants who, in either case, were no more than mere appendages to male members of the gang (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). This traditional view stands in stark contrast to recent public discussions about female gang members, which indicate that female gang members are no longer simply the "molls" of male gang members, but also are establishing their own ground and taking on an active independent role in crime and violence (Chesney-Lind, 1993). In spite of these more recent efforts to study the girls in the gang and dispel popular characterizations of them as "gun packing wild women," questions remain about the violence with which these young women are confronted. To what extent do these young women experience violence in their lives? Does the violence that they experience take place solely on the streets, or do they experience violence within their home lives? Are these women solely victims of this violence, or do they on occasions instigate violence? If so, then what are the reasons for this violence and to whom are they violent?

In answering these questions, this article challenges recent portrayals of the demonic character of female gang members by examining the violence-prone situations in which these young women operate.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The data for this analysis are drawn from a long-term, comparative ethnographic study of ethnic gangs in the San Francisco Bay Area that began in 1991 and continues to the present. From 1991 to 1993, we conducted face-to-face interviews with more than 600 self-identified male and female gang members. (See Waldorf, 1993, and Joe, 1993.) The 65

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<sup>1</sup>Exceptions to this include the work of Bowker and Klein, 1983; Brotherton, 1996; Brown, 1977; Campbell, 1984 and 1991; Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn, 1999; Fishman, 1988; Harris, 1988; Hunt, MacKenzie, and Joe-Laidler, 2000; Joe-Laidler and Hunt, 1997; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991; Ostner, 1986; Quicker, 1983.

female gang members interviewed were from 7 different groups and were located using the snowball sampling approach (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This sampling strategy relied on respondents referring members of their group or other groups to be interviewed. The same technique was used in our second study, which extended our comparative research to Southeast Asian gangs in the same locale. In this effort, we interviewed 91 male and 19 female Southeast Asian gang members from 1993 through 1994. At present, we are engaged in a third study that revisits and explores other contemporary gang issues among males and females in the San Francisco Bay Area. We have 57 completed female interviews from the current study and have included these cases for this analysis. From the three studies, then, we will be drawing on a total sample size of 141 interviews with female gang members.

For years sociologists have been debating the definition of gangs, and the debate continues with little resolution. For the purposes of our research we have adopted Klein's (1971) definition, which as Miller (1996) has noted, is one of the most influential and longstanding. Klein argues that the term "street gang" refers to any group of youths who "a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, b) recognize themselves as a denotable group, c) have been involved in a sufficient number of [illegal] incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and/or enforcement agencies" (Klein, 1971, p. 13). In addition to using this definition, we allowed our respondents to tell us if they were gang members or not. We did this early on in the interviews by asking if they were part of a clique or group and if they were, did they have a name for the group. In this way we attempted to supplement the gang definition by allowing the individual to identify himself or herself as a gang member. Finally, given the experience of many of our interviewees, they were able to detect, early on in an interview, if the respondent had little knowledge of gang life and was primarily a "wannabe" gang member.

The in-depth interview involved a two-step process in which the interviewee first answered a series of questions from a quantitative schedule. The second step entailed a tape-recorded session, and members reflected on questions from a semistructured guide about their gang experiences. This combined approach of qualitative and social survey methodology provided an opportunity to focus on the groups' histories, organization, and activities, and the gang members' demographics, alcohol and drug use, history and involvement with the group, and prior contact with the criminal justice system. We also asked the young women about power relations and gender expectations within the group, with the various males in their lives and with their families. The interviews were conducted in a variety of settings ranging from the respondent's or peer's residence to

parks, church youth centers, and coffee shops. Interviews lasted from 90 minutes to 3 hours. We provided respondents with a \$65 honorarium in recognition of their participation and time.

## SAMPLE

The 141 young women in this study are members of one of 44 different gangs. Table 1 offers an overview of their personal characteristics. The 17 African American women belonged to 1 of 6 groups. Unlike any of the other ethnic groups, 4 of the African American female gangs organize themselves as “independent” groups without any ties to a male group. The members of the “independent” groups have been lifelong friends, growing up in the same neighborhood. The other two gangs are part of larger “mixed-gender” groups that include female and male members. The African American women in the sample are older than the females of other ethnic gangs, ranging between the ages of 14 and 27, with a median age of 23 years.

The African American women come from highly marginalized backgrounds. Although slightly more than half of them report that they have lived principally with their mother and father until their midteen years, one of the parents, usually the father who was unemployed or in unskilled labor work, often left home for months at a time because of alcohol and drugs. More than one-third of them have lived only with their mother and have had very limited or no contact at all with their fathers. Their mothers tend to be either working in the service sector or unemployed. The girls rely principally on hustling (drug sales and shoplifting) and public assistance to support themselves and their children.

Among the other ethnic groups, the majority of the young women belong to “auxiliary” groups attached to male gangs. All of the Latina and 17 of the Asian Pacific American girls belong to one of these groups that consider themselves “separate but equal” to their male counterparts. These young women range in age from 14 to 32, with a median of 18 years of age. The Latinas come from more diverse communities and backgrounds compared with the African American girls. Nearly 40% of the Latinas were born in Mexico or Latin America and immigrated with at least one parent. Almost 30% of the girls have lived with their mother and father. Nearly half of the girls indicate that they have lived principally with their mothers, and several of them state that their fathers had either left the family or returned to their native land. When fathers were present, they were skilled, semiskilled, or unskilled laborers. Most mothers worked in the service sector or in unskilled positions. Among the 98 Latinas, approximately one-third report that at least one of their parents has had problems with alcohol or drugs.

**Table 1. Personal characteristics of girls in the gang**

	<b>African American (n = 17)</b>	<b>Latina (n = 98)</b>	<b>Asian American (n = 26)</b>	<b>Total (n = 141)</b>
<b>Age (median)</b>	23	18	18	18
<b>Place of birth</b>				
United States	100%	61%	27%	60%
Mexico/Latin America	0%	39%	0%	27%
Vietnam	0%	0%	73%	13%
<b>Domestic unit prior to 16 yrs of age</b>				
Mother & father (incl. stepparent)	53%	34%	61%	41%
One parent	35%	52%	23%	45%
Other	12%	14%	8%	13%
Unknown	0%	0%	8%	1%
<b>Education completed</b>				
9th grade or less	24%	42%	23%	36%
10th grade	24%	16%	23%	18%
11th grade	35%	21%	35%	26%
12th grade +	17%	20%	11%	18%
Unknown	0%	0%	8%	1%
<b>Employed full/part time</b>	0%	30%	15%	23%
<b>If employed, type of work</b>				
Skilled	0%	21%	50%	24%
Service industry	0%	55%	25%	52%
Unskilled/semiskilled	0%	24%	25%	24%
<b>Primary source of income</b>				
Job	0%	25%	15%	20%
Family/friends	6%	40%	73%	42%
Public assistance	35%	16%	0%	15%
Hustles	41%	4%	12%	10%
Combination	18%	15%	0%	13%
<b>Marital status</b>				
Single	71%	78%	92%	80%
Living together/married	23%	21%	8%	19%
Separated	6%	1%	0%	1%
<b>% with or expecting children</b>	82%	43%	8%	41%

*Note:* Percentages may not total 100% because of rounding.

The Asian American females were similar in age to the Latinas, with a median of 18 years of age and ranging in age between 15 to 21. The majority of Asian American girls are Chinese, Chinese Vietnamese, and Vietnamese who have immigrated from Vietnam. The girls come from different neighborhoods, primarily working-class houses and flats. More than 60% of them live with both parents. The respondents' fathers work in small businesses and semiskilled jobs, and their mothers are employed in small businesses or in semiskilled or service industry jobs. Most of the girls are still attending school and rely on their family and friends for money. Only one is living with her partner and expecting a baby.

## DOMAINS OF VIOLENCE

Three domains of violence exist in the lives of girl gang members: the street, the family, and relationships with boyfriends.

### Violence on the Streets

This section examines the situations of violence these young women encounter on the streets. The range of situations varies depending upon the organization of the girl's gang. Although the "independent" and "separate-but-together" gangs report some similar situations of violence, the latter group of gangs describe many other serious incidents. These other violence-prone situations are related, in large part, to their associations and activities with their male counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

### *Females in Independent Gangs*

On the street, the women in the independent gangs confront two main situations of potential and real violence. These situations are associated with selling drugs and competition with females in other gangs.

These young women describe themselves as being autonomous from males and pride themselves on being able to care for themselves and their children, despite having had to drop out of school. They have devised a number of income-generating strategies, including "boosting" (selling stolen goods) and drug dealing. Because they are on their own, they take precautions on the streets because they recognized that they are potential targets for "drug fiends and robbers." Security for these girls is found in numbers. In addition to relying on their homegirls for protection, they adopted a variety of other precautionary strategies. According to these

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<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the relationship of gang organization and violence see Joe-Laidler and Hunt, 1997.

young women, one way to avoid potential violence is to steer clear of certain areas at particular times of the day. The girls live by the rule of avoiding the streets late at night, when males dominate the streets. Other rules for reducing their vulnerability involve locations for dealing, such as not selling through car windows, and preferences for selling indoors, like in crackhouses. Also, every one of the girls discussed the importance of carrying weapons to deal with potential danger, and admitted to carrying a knife or gun.

As with most gangs, these young women find themselves in conflict with females from other gangs over two main issues: men and turf. For example, according to the women in one gang, conflict with their major rival began in a dispute over men.

- (I) How did these rivalries start?  
(R) ... About our men.  
(I) Meanin'?'  
(R) Somebody in that group will want our men.  
(I) And that's what you guys fight about?  
(R) Yes.  
(I) Do you ever fight about any other things besides your guys?  
(R) No.

These young women believe that men in the mixed gender gangs encourage their own homegirls to take an aggressive stance against the females in independent gangs, thereby instigating the rivalries. Others believe that rivalries start not because of men but over turf and its association with drug sales. In either case, the women recognize the dangers of their rivals and their men. They are aware of the realities of constantly being a potential victim as well as a potential assailant. As women operating in independent groups, they rely on each other for protection, and as a precautionary measure they try to avoid going into their rivals' territory.

### *Females in Separate-but-Together Gangs*

Compared with the young women in the independent gangs, females in other gangs face more situations of potential and real violence. Five situations are identified.

The first situation of violence involves initiations into the gang. Founding members of a group rarely participate in any initiation ceremonies. However, once the group is established, later initiates typically experience the ceremony and rituals of "jumping in." This "rite of passage" involves either "passing the line," or fighting with a gang member one-on-one. In fighting one-on-one, the potential gang member is matched with a girl

of comparable build and strength, or in some cases the novitiate herself chooses her combatant as long as she does not “choose a wimp.” Because the girls are connected with male gangs, potential gang members might be required to fight a homeboy, but this occurs less frequently. In one case this male-on-female violence led to serious injuries and the practice was stopped: “One of the guys hit a girl in the back really bad. So they decided guys will hit guys and girls will hit girls.” This type of initiation does not happen in independent female gangs. Instead of requiring new members to fight to prove their eligibility, the young women in independent gangs insist on potential members proving themselves by stealing from local department stores.

A second situation of violence involves conflict with male members of other gangs. According to the respondents, gangs have clear rules about females staying away from particular settings of violence, like fights between males or drive-by shootings. A few girls, however, report having had to jump in to help in unfair male-on-male fighting situations, such as when one of their homeboys was attacked by three or more rivals. As intended, their intervention broke up the fight, as the rival males refuse to hit the women. Nevertheless, these young women are in a highly vulnerable position given their association with their male counterparts.

Unlike the independent gangs, the women in the separate-but-together gangs, because of their affiliation with male groups, face another situation of potential violence involving rivalries with other similarly structured gangs. Although the separate-but-together homegirls know that their own involvement in violent situations among males might stop a fight, at the same time they became targets for violence generally associated with males (for example, drive-by shootings).

A third situation, similar to that experienced by the young women in the independent gangs, occurs when women in separate-but-together gangs find themselves in situations of conflict with homegirls from other gangs. However, in contrast to the African Americans much of this potential and real violence is instigated by the girls’ own homeboys:

- (I) Do the boys expect the girls to act a certain way?
- (R) Sometimes. Like sometimes when you are all hanging together and the guys say, “Hey, go jump that girl,” right, for no reason. You don’t want to.
- (I) If you guys don’t do it, then what happens? Do they let it go?
- (R) Well sometimes they’ll hit you, but just playing.

According to some respondents, one reason for this instigation is that their homeboys like to see girls fighting. However, the girls in both types of groups do not like to be provoked into fighting with rival homegirls by

any males (whether they were the rivals' boyfriends or their own homeboys). Some girls see male provocation as senseless and domineering.

A fourth situation involves internal conflict between female members of a gang. In contrast with the women in the independent gangs, women in the separate-but-together groups admit that they got into fights among themselves, usually because of gossiping, "talking shit," drinking and getting drunk, or conflicts over men. In relation to gossiping, or "talking shit" (making derogatory comments about a homegirl's reputation), other researchers of gang life (Dietrich, 1998; Moore, 1991) note that notions of respect and honor are vitally important characteristics for a homegirl's life, and many of the Latinas describe the elements of a "good reputation":

[It means] that you are not a ho, that you don't fuck all the homeboys. Even though sometimes you don't do it, everybody talks. So a good reputation is that you take care of your shit. And you respect your elders, and you don't go around the home boys, getting loaded and going to bed with them.

Once a homegirl becomes identified as a "ho," it is difficult for her to regain her good reputation: "I don't want that name. 'Cause the name sticks with you. I don't care if you stop being a slut off the street, it sticks with you. So it's very important to keep a ladylike profile." Within this context of honor, respect, and a fear of achieving a bad reputation, the homegirls often referred to others "talking shit." When "talking shit" occurs, homegirls confront each other, demand a recantation or an explanation, and if it is not forthcoming, then violence can and does occur.

Internal fighting also takes place in the context of "partying" and drinking. Alcohol is a major theme in street life and "hanging out,"<sup>3</sup> especially among the Latinas and the African Americans. For the auxiliary gangs, drinking occurs in both public and private settings, and in many of the accounts of conflict between the homegirls, drinking and getting drunk plays an important contributory role.

Another issue that leads to conflict between homegirls within the same gang are disputes over males. Whereas descriptions of homeboy-instigated violence and fighting over men between homegirls were completely absent in the interviews with the women in the independent gangs, for the Latinas and Asian Americans this type of violence accounts for the majority of conflicts between homegirls. Other cases of homegirl conflict are occasioned by rivalry and jealousy between girls over individual homeboys. Fortunately, internal fights are confined to "regular" fistfighting, and do not involve weapons.

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<sup>3</sup>For a fuller discussion of the role of alcohol in the lives of female gang members see Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and MacKenzie, 2000.

The fifth situation of violence for women in separate-but-together gangs involves conflict between homegirls and homeboys in the same gang. Because the males and females hold a collective identity, the young women indicate that they feel protected not only by the knowledge that their homegirls back them up, but also that their homeboys are there to defend them or avenge males who disrespect or assault them. This protection is known as “being down.” It reinforces the traditional gender roles as well as the masculine character of the streets. Moreover, few homegirls describe their homeboys as being oppressively controlling over their lives or physically abusive to them, although some talk about the homeboys being verbally abusive, “talking mean,” or occasionally “just playing.” Sometimes they use other male members (especially the girls’ brothers, if they are members) to keep aggressive male members in check. For example, protection by their homeboys also occurs when homegirls wish to defend themselves from unwelcomed advances from other homeboys. For example, a Latina described a situation where she called on her homeboys to beat up another homeboy because he had been sexually aggressive toward her:

I remember this guy . . . that motherfucker cornered me and grabbed my ass and then tried to kiss me. I was like, “Get your motherfucking ass away from me.” And he was like, he goes, “Hey you are cute though. You need to be with me.” And blah, blah, and like it was every day right after school. . . . Alba and I walked together . . . we went to the house and some of the guys [homeboys] were there. And I said, “Hey you guys I want you to kick this guy’s ass.” And they are like, “What did he do?” I am like, “This fucking guy tried to kiss me and grab my ass.” They are like, “Okay.” So they kicked his ass the next day. They kicked his ass good too.

Although the girls take some comfort in this solidarity, they are paradoxically victims of their male protectors, a situation absent among females in the independent gangs. Such a situation is most strikingly conveyed in this young woman’s recounting of being raped by a fellow homeboy:

He gave me a lot of respect, you know. I used to go to his house drink up, smoke. And he used to really take care of me and I put a lot of trust on him. And once I smoked a leyo with him and I thought he was going to be cool with me. . . . I was by myself. He brought me to his house. I mean, we were at his house and then he brought me into his brother’s room. He locked me in and took off my clothes. And I couldn’t talk, you know. And I was telling him, “Let me go. Let me go. Don’t do this to me.

I'm your homegirl." . . . And I was going, "Let me go. Let me go." And he was slapping me. . . . They took me to San Francisco General Hospital and . . . they told me I was okay. And if I wanted to press charges on him 'cause I had really big bumps on my head and my face. . . . I thought I was going to feel embarrassed, everybody looking at me saying, "She got raped." I told nobody, but everybody knew. And they were looking at him bad. They were going to break his window. And then he called me up and he cried. He used to write me letters and he used to tell me that he loved me. And that he just wanted to have me in his arms and everything. And I said, "You shouldn't do that in the first place 'cause I was your homegirl and everything."

These girls' experiences suggest a complex relationship with their male counterparts in which the girls simultaneously are protected from potentially aggressive situations, but also are open to sexual victimization by their protectors.

## Violence in the Family

Girl gang members' relationships with their parents and other family members are varied and complex, with some reporting strong family ties, others describing violent confrontations or sexual and physical abuse, and others expressing extreme hatred (Moore & Hagedorn, 1996).<sup>4</sup> Two significant relationships can be identified from the homegirls' discussions of family: relations with their mothers and relations with fathers and stepfathers.

### *Mothers*

The most significant relationship for the majority of the young women is with their mothers. Most describe generally positive ties with their mothers, seeing their mothers in traditional terms as well as accommodating to changes in the mother's role and position in the family. However, even within these more positive accounts, the young women make references to the disruptive features in their family. One 15-year-old respondent, who reports having a good relationship with her mother, casually remarks that she currently is living with her sister. When asked why, she replied "'Cause my mom got locked up . . . 'Cause of drugs. Shooting up."

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<sup>4</sup>For a fuller discussion of girl gang members' relationships with family members see Hunt, MacKenzie, and Joe-Laidler, 2000.

Disruptions to their relationships surface in ways in which the girls feel they have little control. A few respondents find their relationship changing with their mothers when the latter becomes involved with men:

Me and my mom, always had a good relationship, but for like a year, I moved away from her and we stopped talking 'cause she got with this other guy and, you know, I just didn't like it. . . . I felt that this guy was like, just using her, and I didn't, I couldn't stand it 'cause it was my mom, you know, and I've always been pretty much with my mother, I've always had a good relationship.

In contrast to these more positive accounts, many homegirls describe conflictual relationships with their mothers. More than half of the sample blame their mothers for the problems in the home. Of these, more than one-half attribute problems to their mothers' drinking or drug use. Even so, some of the girls accept their mothers' problems and assume the parental role over the mother as well as over younger siblings.

Two respondents' criticisms of their mothers stem from their mothers' failure to protect them from their stepfathers' sexual molestation and assaults. The respondents report that their trust in their mothers has been undermined and that a "lot of hatred" now exists in the home, making living together an impossibility. However, in almost all the cases, even when the women report hostile and negative relations with their mothers some level of interaction still occurs, and only in a few cases is interaction completely broken.

In spite of these respondents' negative feelings toward their mothers, they nevertheless maintain ties with their mothers, partly out of familial loyalty and love, but also for instrumental reasons. It is their mothers who they turn to in times of need. Although a few respondents express strong feelings of animosity toward their mothers for past behaviors, they rely on them for help in looking after their children, shelter, and even protection. This seemingly contradictory behavior is strikingly highlighted in one case, where the respondent, although having described her mother in the early part of the interview in lurid terms, for example, "a fuckin' bitch" and "a fuckin' drunk," later on proudly describes how, having got in a fight with an older woman, she telephones her mother to come and defend her, and how her mother, having "hunted down" the older woman, "kicks her ass":

I went and called my mom. I said the bitch wants to fuck with me. I said, "Mom, drop off my son and come and look at my face 'cause she got two hits on me," and I said, "Mom, get over here. I just fought this bitch and she's as old as you." . . . She came and said, "Where's this bitch at?" I was like, "Oh man, my mom's from New York, you know, and

my mom all hunting that bitch down,” and I didn’t get to see her kick her ass, but, you know, everybody was like, “Damn it, look at Maria’s mom.” They thought I was going to go snitch and call the cops. I said, “Nah, I’m calling someone better. I’m calling my mom.”

The intricacy of these relations and intensity of feelings expressed by these young women toward their mothers also can be seen from those cases where the respondents recounted situations where they had physically defended their mothers. The defense of, and sense of loyalty to, their mothers also came through in their home lives, as the young women often witnessed conflict between their parents or between their mothers and mothers’ boyfriend or spouse. Nearly half of the women reported such incidents of violence in the home and most of the time they sided with their mothers.

### *Fathers and Stepfathers*

Just as their relationships with their mothers were varied, so also are their relationships with their fathers, although not as extensive or complex. However, in comparing their relationships with their mothers with those of their fathers, one significant difference emerges. Female gang members have less to say about their fathers. Fewer than one-fourth provide information about these relationships. In some cases, they mention their fathers only in passing; in others, their fathers seem to be nonexistent. This feature is not surprising when we consider the small proportion of respondents, approximately a third, who have lived with their fathers for most of the time until their sixteenth birthday. Although some respondents describe growing up as “just normal” and having good relationships with their fathers, many in the course of the interview recount situations of tension and disruption within the family.

Alcohol and drug consumption and alcohol-related violence play a much more significant role in the accounts of their relationships with their fathers as opposed to their mothers—a characteristic also evident in the discussions of their stepfathers. Accounts of the latter are in general more negative than those pertaining to their fathers. Like the accounts of their fathers, the majority of the stepfathers are described either in passing or in harsh terms such as, “He disgusts me,” and “I hate him a lot.” Sometimes tension has resulted in violence, especially between the respondents’ mothers and fathers/stepfathers or between their mothers and their boyfriends. The matter-of-fact way in which these incidences of family violence are described suggests that they were often regular occurrences within the family.

As many writers have noted (Campbell, 1991; Joe & Chesney Lind, 1995; Moore, 1991), violence between parents, between siblings, and be-

tween parents and children are commonplace in homegirls' stories of their families, and homegirls are often witness to, and the victims of, multiple incidents of abuse in their homes, whether from their fathers/stepfathers, mothers, or siblings.

Violence directed at the respondent is the most common reason provided by respondents for negative feelings toward their fathers or stepfathers. The most extreme form of violence described by the young women is rape or sexual molestation. In the three cases where this had occurred, stepfathers account for two of the perpetrators, and the best friend of the father for the third. In the case of the father's best friend, the young woman describes how she hates her father not only because she blames him for his best friend raping her, but also because of his violence toward her—he often points a gun at her head. She also notes in her account that these events are the reasons why she herself is violent today:

I would get like hate for my dad, 'cause he didn't take care, he left me alone when he was supposed to take care of me and his best friend raped me when I was 7... That's why I got so violent, you know, where I could just kill somebody ... 'cause that anger that was inside of me... I feel a lot of that frustration, you know, those people hurt me, man, they hurt me when they do that to me, and that's why I guess I got to a point where I said nothing's gonna hurt me no more, nobody's gonna see me shed a tear for nothing that they did to me. I remember when my dad used to put a gun to my head, it took all fear away from me from dying... Everything was always stripped from me. I didn't have nothing no more.... Something in me was already taken away as a little girl.

Other young women remember violent events with their mothers' boyfriends. In the following example, the young woman describes her attempts to protect her mother, who she notes was beaten on a regular basis:

He would always beat up on my mom, and I was the one that would call the police because my sister would get scared and go and run and put herself in a corner. They were usually at night. We are trying to go to sleep and we always wake up to my mom screaming. I would wake up and my sister would be all scared and I would be like, "It is okay. I will call the police." Every single time I would try and help my mom. Try to beat him with something. I would always grab some shit and ... throw it at him or something and try to get him off her. That motherfucker was strong.

Despite the ups and downs in the young women's relationships with their mothers, they nevertheless maintain emotional and instrumental ties. In many cases, relationships are reciprocal in the sense that at times

mothers provide the nurturing and protective role for their daughters, and at other times the daughters assume the motherly role of caregiver and protector. This intimacy and reciprocal care-giving is largely absent in the young women's relationships with their fathers, where interaction is best characterized as distant, periodic, and strained. In essence, their relationship is nonrelational. Only a few of the female gang members describe feelings of affection and warmth toward their fathers.

Family disruption is a major reason for running away, with the homegirls citing problems with their mothers or stepfathers or parental drug use. More than half of the sample has run away from home at least once, some for only a day, whereas others left home for up to 2 years, some as many as 20 times. Yet leaving the family for however long is not always because the respondents wish to escape family conflict. Other reasons for running away include a desire to be independent, the attraction of life outside the family, and, in one case, simply the desire to attend a rave.

### Violence with Boyfriends

In spite of the dangers that exists for the homegirls on the street, conflict with boyfriends at home is the most significant arena for violence. The girls quickly learn that the men in their lives have a number of general assumptions about women. Our respondents uniformly agree that the men in their lives had certain conventional expectations of them. For example, Natalie, a 24-year-old African American girl in an independent group, succinctly summarizes this common view: "He just want me to act *like a woman* [her emphasis]." The girls are very clear on what the men define as "acting like a woman." One key defining feature was for the women to be domestic. Many of the young women complain that they are constantly cleaning and cooking when they hang out with their boyfriends at somebody's house, when they are partying, or attending barbecues and picnics at the park. The girls' reaction to these expectations vary, with some accepting this "feminine duty" and others completely rejecting it by confronting the men.

In addition to the requirement of fulfilling domestic chores, boyfriends also demand that the women bring in their share of the household income. If the woman does not comply, then violence could occur. For example, as Tanya, a 23-year-old African American girl makes clear:

He wants me to do everything for him. He wants me to cook his dinner, wash his clothes and shit, and he slaps me around when I don't do it . . . because I didn't have his dinner ready when he came from outside selling his dope. And I didn't have his tennis shoes—wasn't white enough one

time—so he beat me up. He is mean to me at times. He wants to control me. I go out to make money for my kids and he wants my money so he can invest it in his dope and get more dope. I am like, “What if somebody take it off him, where is my money?” It is gone. He wants me to be just down for him and do whatever he wants. He wants me to sell dope for him. But I don’t. I sell it for myself to make money for my kids.

Others in similar situations, indicate that although they would attempt to fulfill the domestic requirements, they are nevertheless unwilling to be “duped” into giving their income, usually from drug dealing or shoplifting, to them.

According to the women, boyfriends, and to an extent homeboys, hold other traditional expectations of them. In particular, they were expected to act within the confines of “appropriate womanly behavior.” The lists of “don’ts” included “not to flirt with men, not to sleep with men other than your boyfriend, not to take drugs or too much alcohol, and not to be foul-mouthed,” especially in the presence of “others.” Controls over the women increase when a homeboy assumes the role of a boyfriend. Activities that the young women previously had been involved in now became curtailed. For example, boyfriends often disapprove of the homegirls hanging out on the streets:

My boyfriend is alright, but he is a pain in the ass. He don’t want me to be hanging out. He thinks he can own me. He won’t let me do nothing. He won’t let me go out with my friends and hang out. When I leave without permission, when I come back he just gets mad and slaps me.

As Dietrich has noted, boyfriends expected their girlfriends to be “‘regular jainas’ who stayed home and waited for their men to return” (1998, p. 146). The homegirls recognize that lovers constantly preach and regulate their behavior in large part to protect their own image and status; that is, they did not want to be associated in any meaningful way with “bad girls,” who are simply for fun. But they do not want reputable girls to make them out as fools. It is his image that is to be protected as “master,” rather than as “fool.”

They also recognize the power associated with their boyfriends’ expectations. The consequences of completely defying or resisting these expectations can be severe, involving violence. Although many of the women describe their ideal man as a “gentleman” who treats them well and respects them, “I want a guy who like has a car, has money, has good looks, nice, and is not going to talk shit to me and not going to threaten me,” many of the women described how they were constantly in and out of abusive relationships. For example, the respondent who described

above her ideal man went on to say, when asked to compare the qualities of her ideal man with the homeboys she had dated:

- (I) Are those the kind of boys that you have been dating?
- (R) No. The guys that I usually date don't have cars, they don't have money, and if they do it is drug money. They want to fight with me, they want to talk shit to me, they want to threaten me. They are cute; that's about all they are good for.

Overall, the women dislike, and in some cases reject, aggressive attempts to make them conform to more traditional notions of femininity, including sexual chastity, staying at home, cooking, and looking after children.

## CONCLUSION

What then can we conclude from this material? First and most obviously, girl gang members experience an extensive amount of violence in their lives whether on the streets, in their family lives, or in their relationships with their boyfriends and lovers. Second, they experience the violence not solely as victims, but on some occasions they act as the instigators of the violence. Although many of the accounts given by these young women describe situations where they had violence done to them, they also describe occasions where they have been violent toward others. In the context of the family, respondents often describe their violent behavior as defending family members or family honor. Third, on some occasions they are neither victims nor instigators but witnesses. In discussing their home lives, our respondents describe having witnessed violence between their mothers and fathers, stepfathers, or mothers' boyfriends. Finally, when we consider the impact of social organization and violence in the gang we find that the women in auxiliary gangs are more subject to "violence-prone situations" than those in the independent gang. Although all the respondents recount a variety of violent situations that had to be confronted on a daily basis, the risk of being harmed appears to have been present in many more settings for the young women in the auxiliary groups than for those in the independent groups. Whereas the former confront potential violence both inside and outside the gang, the women in the independent gangs have to deal only with potential violence outside the gang. Their own homegirls provide a refuge for them and are reliable and dependable. For the others, violence is perpetrated not only by men but also by their own homegirls. Whereas the women in the independent gangs feel safe among their fictive fam-

ily of “sisters,” the auxiliary gang girls describe a number of situations where they have to protect themselves and their reputations from other “sisters.”

The main focus of this article has been to examine the different situations of violence female gang members encounter both on the streets and in their private lives with lovers and family. We have tried to contextualize their involvement in these situations of violence sometimes as offenders (or more precisely as defenders of their honor and reputations and personal safety), but also as victims living in a tension-filled, sometimes hostile, environment. It is not that they seek out violent encounters, but rather, they must seek out a place at home, on the street, and in a marginalized community, and in doing so they may have to resort to violence to protect themselves. Importantly, however, we must underscore that in seeking out a place at home and on the streets, violence, although present, does not consume these young women’s everyday lives. Much of their everyday lives entail getting together to talk and shop, to hang out, and to care for their children. Their reasons for joining the group, after all, are related to their desire to have and create a sense of family (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995).

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