Girls and Violence:
Tracing the Roots of Criminal Behavior

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Contents

1

Girls and Violence

I know I won't have a perfect life. But, I wanna have a good life. I wanna stay in college as long as I possibly can, and I wanna own a house. I still don't want no kids yet. You gotta spend a lotta time raisin' kids. I don't really have patience with kids. I'm still a kid myself.
—*Sherry, 15 years old*

While researching and writing this book, I was acutely aware of the media coverage of "girls' violence."[1] One exceptional news story occurred in a bedroom community north of New York City. Eight girls, aged 14 to 16 years old, allegedly beat and set fire to a 32-year-old female counselor in a treatment center for troubled teens. The police chief expressed his shock at the "viciousness" of the attack, exclaiming, "it's hard to believe that we're dealing with children here."[2] When the district attorney (DA) announced indictments on charges of attempted murder and assault, she stated: "We cannot excuse anyone, because of their age, from being held accountable or responsible for their actions."[3] Neither the police chief nor the DA mentioned gender or race—there was no need. The fact that females were involved in such a horrific act was the story; that the (photographed and named) accused were African American and Hispanic reinforced racial stereotypes of wild and unredeemable youth. It was another disturbing story of out-of-control girls, another reason to fear young women of color.[4]

That a violent offender is female elicits a collective sense of surprise, even alarm, in most sectors of the population. The seemingly

1

extraordinary event grabs our attention and rattles our assumptions about how girls are "supposed" to act. So many of us who are privileged by race, class, and gender also are granted "safe privilege"—what geographer James Tyner describes as the ability of some people to go about their daily routines free from the direct effects of community and interpersonal violence.[5] Thus freed, we turn away and avoid the need to confront and question the production of such violence. It is easier to condemn the violators: once the New York incident was publicized, the Internet erupted with sexist and racist screeds that called for severe and public punishment of the young "witches" and "monsters."[6]

Months after the original reports, a local newspaper investigation chronicled the life of Lidia, one of the 16-year-olds charged in the case.[7] Unlike the early, sensationalistic coverage, this account was based on several years of court records and child welfare reports, interviews with family members, and excerpts from the girl's journal. The newspaper story documented a history of parental alcohol and drug abuse, sibling incest, foster care placements, physical abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Eventually, because the girl was truant, ran away, and drank alcohol, she was placed in a residential center and treated for depression and alcohol abuse. Describing children at the center, one employee said, "They've just had horrific stuff thrown at them."[8] Clearly, Lidia had. But now she was charged with attempted second-degree murder. So, how does the victimized become the victimizer?

In my own research with adolescent girls, I have thought a lot about this duality of violence, questioning what violence even means for girls growing up in decimated, postindustrial inner cities.[9] The term *violence* is imbued with a host of meanings and, despite their official "violent offender" label, most of the girls I interviewed for this book did not see themselves as such. When asked, many girls described defensive maneuvers taken to counter the abhorrent acts of adults in their lives. I sat and talked with girls who were funny and caring and strong and resilient but who, in the same conversation, became tough, cynical, even menacing, as they told of their attacks on family members, peers, and strangers. How are these experiences connected, and how might girls' interpretations of violence be tied to family dynamics in the context of the larger community? These questions must be answered if we are to understand girls' experiences and violent behaviors.

To begin, we know that girls are targets of violence. A comprehensive 2009 nationwide survey of the incidence and prevalence of

children's exposure to violence reported that 42 percent of girls had experienced a physical assault in the prior year, and 7.4 percent had experienced a sexual assault. Over their lifetime, 52.9 percent of girls had experienced a physical assault and 12.2 percent reported being sexually victimized.[10] Extensive evidence from national incidence reports consistently has found that girls are sexually abused at a rate more than five times that of boys; the incidence of psychological and emotional abuse is also higher for girls.[11] Girls who end up in state justice systems have much higher victimization rates compared with girls in the general population, including a disproportionate risk for incest and other child abuse as well as acquaintance and stranger rape as adolescents. Interview data have indicated that, within the national juvenile custodial population, nearly one-third of all youths reported a history of prior abuse. When custodial males and females are compared, females "reveal nearly twice the rate of past physical abuse (42 percent vs. 22 percent), . . . and more than four times the rate of prior sex abuse (35 percent vs. 8 percent)."[12]

We also know that girls do act violently. In addition to histories of victimization, research has documented young women's participation in disorderly conduct and street fights for at least the past century.[13] The expansion of historical work on incarcerated females provides evidence of a range of violent offenses including robbery, assault, and homicide.[14] According to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data from 1980 through 2010, 3,594 juvenile females were implicated in homicides in the United States (compared to 42,723 juvenile males), and nearly 30 years of self-report data reveal that, on average, girls account for about 15 percent of high-frequency assaults and about 35 percent of less frequent or minor involvement in violence.[15] In 1988, girls' arrests for violent crime (driven primarily by assaultive behavior) began to rise and continued to increase proportionately more than did violent crime arrests of boys; when overall violence began to fall a decade later, the female rate dropped proportionately less than the male rate.[16]

Prior to the late 1980s, the number of girls engaged in violence in the United States was low and their arrest rates were stable. News coverage was rare and unlikely to generate much social anxiety. But as the crack cocaine trade began to flourish in poor, African American, and Hispanic neighborhoods and girls' arrests began their ascent, media accounts of female involvement in drug-related crime and violence suddenly multiplied[17] and sensational headlines continued to inflate public fears over the next decade. The media used the national FBI

arrest statistics that indicated a rise in female delinquency to frame extreme cases as typical: "the episodic rhetorically recrafted into the epidemic."[18] Stories of "vicious young women" engaged in extreme acts of violence (e.g., the "baby-faced butcher" of Central Park) or "joining gangs that fight and rob like male gangs" were effectively contrasted with hegemonic gender expectations to present girls as violent marauders.[19] Racialized images of gun-toting girls merged with stories of youngsters battling over drug product and turf to construct an urban (black) female "gangsta" ready to wreak havoc on a nation already in fear of its youth and a purported drug epidemic.[20] Misperceptions of juvenile crime and youths (boys and girls) as violent superpredators justified increasingly punitive state strategies, including sweep laws, zero-tolerance policies, waivers to adult court, and the extensive use of detention and incarceration.[21]

Subsequent analyses have discredited much of the hype surrounding girls' violent offending, and contentious international debates as to whether female arrest rates are up or down and by what percentage have substantially diminished. Indeed, research has indicated little overall change in girls' level of violence between 1980 and 2003, as well as little change in the female-to-male percentage of violent offending. Female violence may be rare, but it is overreported in the media. The supposed meteoric rise in serious juvenile female violence appears to be "more a social construction than an empirical reality."[22] Widened regulatory nets and punitive policies created in the wake of the ongoing dispute, however, continue to affect young women and girls, and lingering arguments about the *amount* of female violence distract from efforts to discern the *context* and the *processes* that may contribute to those behaviors.

Arrest and other official data outline delinquency patterns, but tell us more about law enforcement policies than the motivation for girls' actions.[23] We know that victimized children are more likely than others to become involved in violence, but a deeper understanding of mitigating factors is required—the "cycle of violence" does not sufficiently account for the fact that the majority of abused, neglected, and otherwise victimized girls do not always or necessarily turn to violence.[24] Further, calculating the number of offenses or sensationalizing individual acts fails to appreciate the contexts in which violence occurs or the underlying mechanisms that help to propel it.

To better understand girls' violent behaviors, we need to look wider and deeper than specific acts. Each of us invests our own expe-

riences with meaning, as do girls who are perceived as deviant. Thus, it is important to explore how girls interpret acts of violence (both their own and those of others) and investigate the social and psychological contexts of girls' lives before they become violent criminals in the eyes of the law. What, for example, are the dynamics of their primary relationships? How have girls' experiences of trauma been addressed (or have they)? More broadly, we need also to consider the role of families, communities, and social institutions in the production of violence.

Lidia's story resonates with those told by the two dozen girls interviewed for this book. These are the narratives of girls who the newspapers write about only in the abstract as one-dimensional violent offenders. They are also those of girls who came of age in urban neighborhoods blighted by violence and abandoned by mainstream social, political, and economic institutions. Growing up in the context of banal violence, these mostly African American and Hispanic girls are without "safe privilege"; extraordinary violence is all too often quite ordinary. Prior to becoming wards of the state—at a time when the justice system was rapidly expanding its reach into the lives of minority youths—they inflicted varying measures of physical harm on others and committed a range of property- and drug-related offenses. Significantly, the girls also tell of broken relationships and losses, of neglect and maltreatment, often by the very persons and institutions responsible for their care. Each of them has tightly intertwined histories of violence: violence experienced, witnessed, and enacted at home, in school, and on the streets. They are wounded, but they are not monsters or modern-day witches. Like Sherry, who introduces this chapter, the girls have dreams of a better self and a better life.

Rather than condemn girls and their actions, we need to imagine what happens to a girlchild when families and other institutions fail to keep her physically and emotionally safe. What are the traumatic consequences of those failings, and how might the exposure to violence and experiences of loss contribute to the girl's alienation, stigmatization, and violent aggression?[25] Like Lidia, the girls whose stories form the basis of this book have troubles and they are often troubling—and they made decisions and took defensive steps that added to their troubles. Their stories affirm much of what is known about associations between female exposure to violence and violent offending; of greater import is what they reveal about the traumagenic effects of broken and disrupted primary relationships.

Rendering a Detailed Picture

This book focuses on 24 teenage girls adjudicated and remanded to custody for a robbery or an assault in the mid-1990s.[26] (The characteristics of the interviewees are included in Table 1.1.) It is a secondary analysis of the girls' one-time interviews conducted in 1996 in four New York residential youth facilities. In my analyses of the qualitative data, I integrate constructs of psychosocial theory, particularly attachment theory and the effects of chronic trauma, into a theoretical framework for understanding girls' violent behaviors. I was the senior project director of a federally funded study, Learning About Violence and Drugs Among Adolescents (LAVIDA), that examined relationships between juvenile drug use and trafficking and violent offending based on semistructured interviews with 363 boys and 51 girls in custody for a violent offense.[27] The current secondary analysis is based primarily on interview data from 24 of the 51 girls.[28]

A gender analysis of the LAVIDA quantitative data revealed significant differences, particularly in terms of family relationships.[29] Girls were much less likely than boys to report having someone in their household with whom they could talk about things that were bothering them, and they were significantly more likely than boys to have been sexually bothered or to have witnessed a family member sexually bothering someone. Girls were almost three times more likely than boys to have run away from home overnight and more than twice as likely to have ever been in foster care. But quantitative data alone cannot fully portray the nuances of an adolescent's world; as sociologist Andrew Abbott notes, "all social facts are located in contexts."[30] These quantitative data serve only as a starting point for a more in-depth analysis of the early lives of the incarcerated young women.

LAVIDA's semistructured interview format afforded the girls room to discuss events in detail and provided them with the opportunity and space to raise topics important to their presentation of self. Spontaneous offerings opened unexpected avenues of conversation and introduced new themes that clarified (and just as often muddied or complicated) the narrative and helped to "center and make problematic" diverse life situations.[31] Fourteen-year-old Elena describes a fairly typical violent event:[32]

> It was two of my cousins, my cousin's friend, and me. We was
> in the train station and I told this lady she looked nice and she

Table 1.1   Characteristics of Interviewees (*N* = 24)

Pseudonym	OCFS Offense	Age	Race/Ethnicity (recoded)	Last Grade Completed	Children
Adele	Assault	14	Black	7th	No
Alona	Robbery	15	Black	10th	Yes
Christine	Assault	14	Black	8th	No
Diane	Robbery	16	Black	9th	No
Donna	Robbery	15	Black	7th	No
Elena	Robbery	14	Biracial/Multiracial	9th	Yes
Gayle	Assault	16	Black	6th	No
Gina	Assault	14	Black	8th	No
Jackie	Assault	13	Black	7th	No
Jennifer	Assault	15	Multiracial	9th	No
Jill	Assault	14	White	7th	No
Joanne	Assault	15	Hispanic/Latino	8th	No
Kathy	Robbery	16	White	9th	Yes
Lauren	Assault	15	Black	8th	No
Lisa	Assault	15	Black	8th	No
Marcella	Assault	15	Hispanic/Latina	6th	No
Maria	Assault	14	Hispanic/Latina	9th	No
Michelle	Assault	16	Black	7th	No
Natalie	Assault	16	Black	9th	No
Paula	Assault	16	Black	6th	No
Rose	Assault	16	Hispanic/Latina	8th	No
Royale	Assault	16	Biracial/Multiracial	8th	No
Sherry	Assault	15	Black	8th	No
Valerie	Assault	15	Black	9th	No

Note: OCFS = Office of Children and Family Services.

was like fronting. She was like y'all black Bs. I was like what? I was already high but I didn't even pay her no mind. My cousin was like you heard what she said? . . . My cousin was like, she pulled the gun out. She was like, which one of you all wanna die tonight? . . . The lady was like, y'all kids. Y'all need to be home in your bed. I was like s'cuse me? She was like, you heard what I said. I said, "what?" and I just punched her. Then I slapped her when we got on the train. Then she was trying to get something outta her pocketbook.

> She pulled out a knife. And I was like, oh, say what? And I
> just smacked her with my gun and just started beating her up.
> . . . And after that, my cousin grabbed her purse. We just got
> off the train and started running.

High on marijuana and acting in concert with other females her
age, Elena attacks a woman in her mid-thirties over perceived insults
regarding race, gender, and age. A verbal exchange escalates to a phys-
ical beating; Elena characterizes the robbery (her official charge) as an
afterthought.

How are these actions to be understood? Is this only about drugs
and out-of-control girls? What else might be going on internally,
beneath the described behaviors? A clue exists in the girls' responses to
questions about trauma. It is at this juncture in the interviews, when we
asked if certain, potentially traumagenic events had ever occurred, that
the girls began to disclose the many and varied harms they had expe-
rienced in their young lives.

The other interviewers on the LAVIDA study and I strove to attend
to what each girl said as well as to the silences, expressions (or lack
thereof), fragments and repetitions—recognizing that the experience of
trauma affects memories and consciousness and thus shapes its telling.
This attentive stance is critical, especially because in disclosing a story
of trauma, the teller relies on a "listening space" where not only is she
able to speak and be heard, but she is believed. During the interviews,
the girls stopped and started, added side comments, and jumped to new
topics. Some descriptions are sharp and specific, others are vague, and
in some the language breaks down completely: "these stories are not
easy to tell, emotionally or linguistically."[33] This is a feature of recall-
ing traumatic experience, made even more difficult perhaps by the
speakers' gender, youth, and devalued status as wards of the state.
Although the study did not formally use the narrative interview method
that criminologist David Gadd describes, our assumptions were similar:

> The reality of the interviewee's biography is greater than the
> sum of the extracted parts; and that those parts elicited during
> the interview are an incomplete set. Memory loss, embarrass-
> ment, shame and the sheer inexpressibility of so much human
> experience delimit the interviewee's capacity (by some unknown
> quantity) to either "tell it like it is" and/or completely conceal
> their own emotional truths.[34]

In conducting this research, we could not expect the girls to be able or willing to reveal all the details of their lives, particularly lives saturated by trauma, or to explain all of the reasons for their actions. Each girl has her own unique tale as to how she came to be in state custody, and the medium of a transcribed interview can only represent it partially: "in what way could we mark the 'beginning' or 'end' of the [young] women's stories?"[35] Writer Joan Didion also reflects on the difficulty of expressing one's own story and suggests that all of us "interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices," and, when asked, try to impose "a narrative line upon . . . the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience."[36] Collectively, the girls' circumstances, experiences, and behaviors belie the assumed clarity of their officially assigned labels of *robbery* or *assault* and tell us much more about *traumagenic* effects of broken relationships. Selective as they must be, the data disclose general patterns that help to explain complex journeys in the aggregate.

As I listened to the girls discuss their families and their neighborhoods, I was struck by the pervasiveness of violence and loss, of lives nearly devoid of personal supports. Revisiting Elena's story, we learn she is the 11th of 14 children. She is placed in foster care as an infant and does not return to her birth family until she is 7 years old. Reinserted into the family unit, Elena recalls fighting with and being beaten by her mother, who has a serious drug problem. At age 11, her father dies of a chronic illness; that same year she watches as a younger brother bleeds to death, stabbed by a neighborhood boy. She describes an older brother as lost to the family because of his lengthy prison sentence ("He 19, by the time he come out, what's gonna be the use?"). Summarizing her family life, Elena explicitly connects early experiences of broken attachments to later delinquency:

> We had so many family problems because I had just lost a little brother, just lost my father; I was really out of control. My family was really slipping away, oh God. It was just breaking off in pieces. It was so much drama, I can't believe it. We had cops in it too, oh man, it was so horrible. . . . I just started flipping and going wild, doing things I wasn't supposed to be doing, then got locked up and that was it.

For Elena (to whom I will turn frequently) and the other girls introduced throughout the book, violent behaviors are linked to the sta-

tus and strength of their emotional bonds with others. My investigation of attachments with primary caregivers, considered within the context of family- and community-related trauma, helps to explicate the processes that draw some girls into violent behaviors.

Crack Cocaine and the Devastation of Community

To appreciate the reality of the girls' lives, it is important to ground their narratives in a particular time and place; their stories reflect inter-personal family dynamics and the nature of the environment in which they came up. Born in the early 1980s into neighborhoods with limited access to services, resources, and power, the girls grew up in the vor-tex of the crack cocaine era. Most lived at the epicenter of the trade—New York City—and several are the daughters of the first-generation of female crack users.[37]

Crack, a cheap new version of cocaine, flooded poor African American neighborhoods beginning in 1983. Its availability and use quickly expanded and, within only a few years, crack was entrenched in certain New York neighborhoods, where it remained popular throughout the 1990s.[38] The pervasiveness of crack cocaine only added to the social ills of neighborhoods already suffering the consequences of back-to-back recessions. In New York and other large East Coast cities, unemployment among urban African American and Hispanic males escalated when low-skilled jobs and manufacturing economies relocated and workers without the requisite service sector skills were forced to the sidelines.[39] Deindustrialization, coupled with discrimina-tion in the labor market, also decreased demand for teenage African American and Hispanic employees and ended the long-run trend of ris-ing youth employment.[40]

Economists Roland Fryer and colleagues argue that crack was responsible for much of the violence in urban neighborhoods. Specif-ically, they found that the rise in crack use between 1984 and 1989 accounted for the doubling of homicides of black males 14 to 17 years old, and an increase of more than 25 percent in weapons arrests of blacks. The increases are linked to the actions of unemployed youth (mostly males) who, while seeking to gain and solidify monetary assets and power in the emerging drug trade, attempted to establish property rights not enforceable through legal means. One result was years of violent turf wars. The domination of neoconservative poli-

tics in the 1980s supported enhanced police surveillance and suppression of drug trafficking, which further added to systemic crack-related violence.[41]

Economic displacements in the inner cities also contributed to a significant rise in the percentage of female heads of household. Women began to use crack cocaine in unprecedented numbers in the 1980s, a factor that compounded their vulnerability to violence in distressed neighborhoods. Female crack users who were also sole caregivers of dependent children burdened already strained community resources.[42] Kinship networks that traditionally come to the aid of members in need were economically and emotionally stretched by years of unemployment, divestment, and the ravages of HIV/AIDS, and could offer women only minimal assistance with child care responsibilities.[43] Punitive criminal justice policies, such as the enactment of federal and state mandatory sentencing laws, dealt harshly with cocaine users and African American women in particular; low-level, nonviolent offenders who in other times might have been directed to drug programming became the fastest-growing segment of the prison population. The vast majority of incarcerated women were parents of minors, and the rise in female imprisonment fueled the growth in foster care caseloads; crack use correlated specifically with a doubling of the percentage of black children in foster care.[44] Crack-involved mothers cycled in and out of jails and prisons and, thus hampered in their ability to provide safe and nurturing environments for their children, were often forced to relinquish parental rights.[45]

Neighborhood context affects individuals and families in gendered ways, shaping experiences of violence and choices in behavior. In this historical moment within inner-city neighborhoods during an overwhelming drug epidemic, parent-child and gender roles are pulled and twisted in many directions. When the domestic sphere provides a fragmented and diminished sense of support and protection, street culture often becomes an important socializing factor.[46] The manner in which the girls in this study constituted a femininity that included violence is but one of many possibilities.[47] But community context alone is an inadequate explanator of the girls' behaviors.

Developmental processes and behavioral outcomes are especially sensitive to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, and few of the interviewed girls had experienced safe and nurturing relationships. At the peak of the era in 1989 the girls were on average only 8 years old and had already suffered extensive losses and victimizations, both in

their homes and in their communities. They describe chaotic families where violence is constant, parental figures rotate, and family composition shifts. The girls report being kicked, beaten, stabbed, and sexually coerced by those closest to them; all too often the caregivers responsible for their development and protection failed them. Lacking the support and supervision of loving and attuned adults to help process and psychologically integrate a wide range of potentially traumatic events and the attendant emotional sequelae, the girls were left to contend with an environment devoid of loving attachments and community supports in milieus generally hostile to females.

A Developmental Model

My purpose in this book is to explore manifestations of violence through the lens of significant early relationships and resultant internal conflicts. Drawing from the literature of developmental psychology and applying inductive, theory-generating techniques of grounded theory, I analyze the girls' interview data to identify categories of loss and violence. Through this process I widen the focus from the girls' behaviors to their subjective experiences; the unit of analysis expands from individual girls to girls in the context of dynamic relational processes.[48] I apply a psychosocial understanding of attachment theory to the girls' perspectives and experiences to construct an attachment-based developmental model, or framework, to help explain the processes underlying girls' violent behaviors.

Attachment theorists assume that children require "a quality of care . . . sufficiently responsive to the child's needs to alleviate anxiety and engender a feeling of being understood."[49] A felt sense of safety provides a "secure base" from which to explore the external environment and to which to return in uncertain times. In simple terms, attachment behavior, the formation of an affective bond between children and their caregivers, protects the young from predators in the environment and promotes the development of self-regulatory functioning.[50] Social affiliation is critical to healthy long-term development and behavior; findings on the psychobiology of the attachment system "illustrate only too clearly how important we may well be for one another, not only at a psychological level . . . but also at a physiological level."[51]

Children who have been neglected, abandoned, or abused by primary caregivers may fail to form, or may suffer the disruption or loss

of, affective bonds. They may develop a pattern of behavior in which avoidance of the caregiver competes with the desire for care from, and proximity to, that person. In this process, angry behavior is likely to become prominent;[52] society generally finds such behavior intolerable and therefore subject to punishment. As I show in the following chapters, in the aftermath of loss, abuse, and neglect, the girls in this study used various maladaptive strategies to protect against (i.e., avoid) psychic pain. Yet they also expressed a need to stay in connection with others. Though many ran away from seemingly unbearable conditions, at some point they all returned. Girls may often cling to those who abuse and cause them pain because the terror of abandonment exceeds the terror of the abuser; there is comfort in an abusive attachment that is familiar.[53] Some of the girls I interviewed appeared to psychically wall off their attachment needs through excessive drug use, even as they described a longing for close and loving relationships. Acts of violence can also be a form of connection; although maladaptive and destructive, trauma-saturated girls may find it difficult to make the distinction.[54] The girls' efforts to create or recreate attachments to others, while simultaneously attempting to counteract traumagenic effects such as overwhelming feelings of anxiety, rage, and shame, were often the very behaviors that put them in direct conflict with the law. A refined understanding of these behaviors requires a psychodynamically informed analysis that privileges the voice of the outcast child.[55]

Overview of the Book

In Chapter 2, I make explicit a model for exploring the "black box" between experiences of loss, victimization, and other traumatic experiences in childhood, and of violent behaviors in adolescence.[56] The theoretical underpinning of this model relies heavily on attachment theory (which stresses the physical and psychological need for the other) in conjunction with the existent trauma research literature. According to attachment theory, internalized affectional bonds, or working models, are active throughout the life cycle and, for the securely attached individual, provide an internalized model of self as worthy and the world as safe. When the need for one another is thwarted, when the primary relationship is disrupted or abused, the results can be devastating; the meaning given to the trauma and the quality of other interpersonal relationships help to shape the outcome. Absence, malformation, or

disruption of psychological attachment may interfere with normal child development and contribute to a range of social problems later in life. When attachment needs are not met, a traumagenic effect may be the interruption of brain development and executive functioning (i.e., judgment, decisionmaking, planning, logical thinking). Such impairment "may produce behaviors perceived as deviant, aggressive, and/or dangerous," but likely serve defensive purposes.[57] Violent behavior becomes an expression of a disrupted attachment system and rage at the psychologically inflicted injury to the self: a "by-product of psychological trauma" and its effects on individuals.[58]

I begin to recount the girls' personal stories in Chapter 3 with an examination of their first and most significant relationship: the affectional tie between the child and her parent or primary caregiver.[59] This bond involves a specific and small number of persons who hold emotional significance and to whom an infant looks for security, comfort, and guidance. This early relationship is instrumental in shaping how we perceive ourselves and how we behave toward one another, not only in infancy but in interpersonal relationships across the life course. Though caregivers within poor and dangerous neighborhoods are subject to severe economic, social, and psychological pressures and conflicts that are likely to affect child rearing, it is how the child perceives the parent-child relationship that is relevant to theories of attachment. The majority of the girls in the current study lived with their mothers most of the time and, thus, the narratives revolve around perceptions of this relationship. The girls reveal a generally weak sense of attachment, feelings of minimal support, and inconsistent monitoring and supervision. Adults unwilling or unable to attend to the girls' innate attachment needs constantly disappoint their expectations of protection and support.

Events and experiences that may be rare in the general population unfortunately are normative among this group of incarcerated girls. In Chapters 4 and 5, I reveal the numerous, varied, and potentially traumatic events that the girls experienced, for the most part, prior to the age of 11 years old. I divide and separately review the girls' extensive exposure to violence in the community and within the home, and the substantial losses they endured. In reality, experiences overlap and seep through these porous boundaries. I begin Chapter 4 by portraying the urban neighborhoods in which the girls and their families lived—neighborhoods that are violent and where drugs and guns are commonplace. Fights, shootings, and killings are the nearly constant

background of daily life, with much of the violence directed at women and girls. The girls also talk about the dynamics of violence and victimization perpetrated within the familial setting, and thereby Chapter 4 extends my discussion, begun in Chapter 3, of weak attachments between the girls and their primary caregivers. Violence takes many forms, including physical and sexual abuse, and is often perpetrated by primary caregivers and ignored or inadequately addressed by other adults.

Against the background of community and family violence, in Chapter 5 I reveal the depth and effect of personal losses. The girls reference four major types of loss: death of loved ones; physical absence of caregivers; psychological unavailability of caregivers; and loss of home. The number and extent of such losses is noteworthy, and their traumagenic effects are amplified when considered in the larger context of violence and victimization experiences and the absence of supportive others. The constant and pervasive sense of vulnerability and loss inhibited the girls' ability to manage internal psychological pain.

In Chapter 6, I examine key ways that the girls attempted to cope with the effects of loss, victimization, and violence. In general, the girls made use of avoidant strategies in the form of excessive alcohol and marijuana use and running away while striving to remain attached to abusive or neglectful, but still loved, caregivers. Most of the girls began their drug use in the context of family and home before integrating heavy, regular usage into daily activities and events. Substance use is both a means of connecting with otherwise unavailable caregivers (a relational strategy)[60] and a defense against psychic pain. The girls also left home, some for a night, others for a month or even a year, to avoid seemingly overwhelming problems. Most returned home in the hope of reconnecting with loved ones. To a lesser extent, the girls also engaged in body mutilation or modification and suicide attempts in their efforts to self-soothe and to gain a sense of self-control.

Avoidant strategies failed to alleviate the psychic pain of absent, malformed, or otherwise disrupted attachments, and the girls sought relief and connection in violent behaviors. In Chapter 7, I examine the specific offenses for which the girls were most recently adjudicated and remanded to custody (either a robbery or an assault). Most of the girls did not readily distinguish between the instant offense and any number of other behaviors (violent and nonviolent) in which they had engaged, but these are the labels that defined them. Though each girl's story could be told within the framework of disrupted or malformed

attachments, justice systems respond to unacceptable behaviors with labels and legal sanctions, irrespective of the particular nature or meaning of the act(s).[61] Privileging the girls' perspectives, I describe the situational context and characteristics of violent acts as well as the primary motivations for the girls' behaviors: respect, revenge, self-defense, and financial gain.

I reiterate the components of an attachment-based model of female adolescent violence for the purpose of reconsidering those violent behaviors that juvenile authorities formally address. I submit that lack of emotional nurturance disrupted the girls' attachments to others and interfered with the healthy development of a secure sense of self. Isolated and rejected, when confronted with new threats (actual or imagined), the girls responded with aggression—a means of defending and preserving the injured and depleted self through connection with others. Though maladaptive and counterintuitive to mainstream norms and expectations, violence is a means of psychic survival.

In the concluding chapter, I urge practitioners and policymakers, community leaders, and academics to take seriously an attachment-based framework for understanding youth violence. This approach highlights the importance of early relationships with primary caregivers in determining how children perceive themselves and behave toward others, and allows for a deeper analysis of socially disturbing behaviors. Such an approach suggests a reformulation of how we understand girls' behaviors and how we define the purported problem of violence. The chapter considers some of the policy, programmatic, and theoretical implications of addressing juveniles' attachment needs in families, communities, and social institutions, including educational and justice systems.

The voices of young people, specifically young women, are rarely heard and their perspectives on interpersonal violence have been, until quite recently, marginalized; here, their stories are central. Each girl's account is a complicated story, with nuances that statistical data and official labels obscure. The girls speak directly of violence and loss in their young lives, and the pain and rage of having their knowledge and experience ignored or denied. Their statements and circumstances may be shocking, perhaps even unbelievable, and this is exactly why we must not take refuge in safe privilege. Unlike most delinquency studies, the girls in this research are at the deep end of the juvenile justice system: each is adjudicated delinquent and remanded to residential custody for crimes against a person and, as such, constitute a minority among all

girls in trouble with the law. The participants cannot be considered typical and may be perceived as, and perhaps even represent, a "tougher," more "damaged" group of girls.[62] They also represent, however, the girls that families discard, and increasingly punitive and intrusive systems of control take in. Their position in relation to the justice system is important, yet relatively unknown. Collectively, the girls' narratives provide a unique entrée into an oft-hidden world; bringing aspects of the private into the public arena, they alert us to the psychological processes that "exacerbate or reduce our need to be destructive."[63]

Notes

1. Official and self-report definitions of violence are not necessarily in agreement and both have been seriously challenged; in feminist criminology, *girls* and *violence* are highly contested terms. See Alder and Worrall, *Girls' Violence;* Leschied et al., "Aggression in Adolescent Girls," p. 8; Messerschmidt, "From Patriarchy to Gender," p. 179; Batacharya, "Racism, 'Girl Violence,' and Murder"; Kadi, *Thinking Class.*

2. Liebson et al., "Counselor Beaten."

3. Rae and Cohen, "Lidia's Story."

4. Kinetz, "School Attack." See also Luke, "Girls' Violence," for a discussion of the emergence of girls' violence as a social problem in the print media.

5. Tyner, *Space, Place and Violence,* pp. 170–171.

6. See, for example, www.greekchat.com, www.stormfront.org; forums.jolt online.com; news.mensactivism.org; and www.freerepublic.com.

7. Rae and Cohen, "Lidia's Story."

8. Foderaro, "Violence Is a Symptom."

9. In this book, I am interested in violence directed against individuals (including the self), not against objects.

10. Finklehor et al., "Violence, Abuse, and Crime Exposure."

11. When sexual victimization and sexual assault are not included, patterns of child maltreatment are similar for girls and boys. Sedlak et al., *Fourth National Incidence Study,* p. 22.

12. Sedlak and McPherson, "Youth's Needs and Services"; Sedlak et al., *Fourth National Incidence Study.* Local studies replicate the national patterns; see Cauffman et al., "Gender Differences in Mental Health Symptoms"; Corrado et al., "Incarceration of Young Female Offenders"; Corrado et al., *Multi-Problem Violent Youth.*

13. See, for example, Davies, "'These Viragoes'"; Godfrey, "Rough Girls"; Alexander, "The 'Girl Problem.'"

14. Rafter, *Partial Justice;* Rose, *Massacre of the Innocents.*

15. Puzzanchera et al., "Supplementary Homicide Reports." See Heide and Solomon, "Female Juvenile Murderers," pp. 245–246. For information on self-

report data, see Steffensmeier et al., "Assessment of Recent Trends." See also Huizinga et al., "Co-occurrence of Delinquency"; J. Miller, *Getting Played;* Chesney-Lind and Belknap, "Trends in Delinquent Girls' Aggression."

16. Violent juvenile crime escalated in the late 1980s, peaked in 1994, and then dramatically dropped in the subsequent decade. Female juvenile arrest rates dropped 11 percent compared to a decrease of 35 percent for male juveniles. Snyder and Sickmund, *Juvenile Offenders and Victims,* p. 8. The number of girls (under the age of 18 years) involved in violent crime remains much smaller than the number of boys. For Violent Crime Index offenses (e.g., murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault), the 2010 juvenile male arrest rate (358) was more than 4 times the female rate (85). "Juvenile Arrest Rate Trends," OJJDP *Statistical Briefing Book.*

17. In the 1988 election year, stories about the "crack epidemic" appeared regularly in both the print media and on television. See Reeves and Campbell, *Cracked Coverage.*

18. Reinarman and Levine, "The Crack Attack," p. 24.

19. See Lee, "For Gold Earrings and Protection"; Evans, "Young, Female and Turning Deadly"; Chesney-Lind and Eliason, "Invisible to Incorrigible." In their examination of reporting patterns of juvenile homicide in two major Chicago newspapers from 1992 to 2000, Boulahanis and Heltsley ("Perceived Fears") found that the newspapers may have been responsible for socially constructing an atypical image of juvenile homicide by overreporting cases involving girls, Caucasians, and extremely young victims and offenders.

20. Tisdall, "Rising Tide of Female Violence?"; Leslie et al., "Girls Will Be Girls"; Pizarro et al., "Juvenile 'Super-Predators'"; Chesney-Lind, "Jailing 'Bad' Girls."

21. DiIulio, "Coming of the Super-Predators"; Feld, "Violent Girls?"; Benekos and Merlo, "Juvenile Justice."

22. Boulahanis and Heltsley, "Perceived Fears"; Steffensmeier et al., "Assessment of Recent Trends," p. 397. Researchers note the low base rate of girls' offending and the sensitivity of UCR arrest statistics to criminal justice selection bias. When multiple sources such as victimization and self-report data are used to analyze trends in girls' violence, there is no dramatic increase. See also Doob and Sprott, "'Quality' of Youth Violence?"; Stevens et al., "Are Girls Getting Tougher?"; Lauritsen et al., "Trends in the Gender Gap"; Garbarino, *See Jane Hit;* Snyder and Sickmund, *Juvenile Offenders and Victims,* 2006; Carrington, "Does Feminism Spoil Girls?"; Sharpe, *Offending Girls.*

23. See Nanda, "Blind Discretion," for a review of the history and current status of the juvenile justice system as it relates to girls of color.

24. See Fagan, "Gender Cycle of Violence."

25. Robinson, "'Since I Couldn't,'" p. 202; Hyman and Perone, "Other Side of School Violence."

26. Following the lead of Christine Alder and Anne Worrall (*Girls' Violence*), I use the term *girls* to make clear that the participants in this research are young teenagers, not to be confused with young adults. Although at times I substitute the term *young women* for *girls,* it is only to provide variation in my writing and not to distinguish age.

27. For a report on the larger study, see Crimmins et al., *Learning About Violence*.

28. Qualitative data from 27 of the 51 cases were destroyed in the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center; quantitative data for all 51 cases had been entered and stored off-site and is used here to supplement the narratives. Although this historic event arbitrarily dictated the selection of cases, analyses of demographic characteristics indicate that the surviving group of 24 is similar to the subsample of 51 from which it came.

29. The analysis compared only the robbery and assault offenders (51 female and 209 male offenders) because there were no female sexual assault offenders and the four female homicide offenders were transferred to adult correctional facilities before they could be interviewed.

30. Abbott, "Of Time and Space."

31. Goffman, *Presentation of Self;* Olesen, "Feminisms and Models," p. 300.

32. Pseudonyms are used throughout this book. See Table 1.1 for characteristics of the interviewees. Note that gun use was not common for this sample of girls.

33. Ferraro, *Neither Angels nor Demons,* p. 7.

34. Gadd, "Masculinities," p. 431. Gadd references the Free Association Narrative Interview method piloted by Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson ("Eliciting Narrative") in their research on gender, anxiety, and fear of crime.

35. Menon and Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries,* p. 18.

36. Didion, *White Album,* p. 11.

37. Ryder and Brisgone, "Cracked Perspectives."

38. B. Johnson et al., "Crack Distribution and Abuse"; Hamid, "Developmental Cycle"; Bourgois, *In Search of Respect.*

39. Small and Newman, "Urban Poverty"; W. J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears;* D. Williams, "Employment in Recession and Recovery."

40. Nardone, "Decline in Youth Population."

41. Fryer et al., "Measuring the Impact of Crack Cocaine." See also Goldstein, "Drugs and Violent Crime"; Bourgois, "In Search of Horatio Alger"; Garland, *Culture of Control.*

42. Sampson, "Urban Black Violence"; W. J. Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged;* Sterk, *Fast Lives;* Goldstein et al., "Frequency of Cocaine Use and Violence."

43. Dunlap et al., "Severely Distressed African-American Family"; Miller-Cribbs and Farber, "Kin Networks and Poverty."

44. Swann and Sylvester, "Foster Care Crisis." Another 15.3 percent is attributed to decreasing Aid to Families and Dependent Children/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (AFDC/TANF).

45. See Crenshaw, "From Private Violence to Mass Incarceration." Fryer et al. ("Measuring the Impact of Crack Cocaine") also attribute to crack use an increase of more than 25 percent in fetal death rates among African Americans between 1984 and 1994. See Reed and Reed ("Children of Incarcerated Parents") and Schirmer et al. ("Incarcerated Parents and Their Children") for a discussion of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) authorizing the ter-

mination of parental rights after a child has been in foster care for 15 of the past 22 months. Because the average prison sentence exceeds 22 months, incarcerated parents dependent on foster care risk losing custody. In June 2010 then New York governor David Paterson signed into law the ASFA Expanded Discretion Act, which allows foster care agencies to refrain from filing for termination if a parent is in prison or residential drug treatment, or if a parent's prior incarceration or program participation is a significant factor in why a child has been placed in foster care.

46. Bourgois, *In Search of Respect,* p. 260.

47. Cain, "Towards Transgression."

48. Daiute and Fine, "Youth Perspectives on Violence."

49. Ansbro, "Using Attachment Theory with Offenders," p. 234.

50. Hofer, "Hidden Regulators."

51. De Zulueta, *From Pain to Violence,* p. 57. Research on neurobiological functions in the brain and the effects of trauma and loss is extensive, and I will only briefly refer to it in subsequent chapters to support an explanation of violent behaviors.

52. Bowlby, *Separation,* pp. 46–47.

53. Shengold, *Soul Murder Revisited.*

54. Fonagy et al., "Morality, Disruptive Behavior"; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery.*

55. Robinson, "'Since I Couldn't.'"

56. Daly, "Women's Pathways to Felony Court," p. 15.

57. Robinson and Ryder, "Psychosocial Perspectives."

58. De Zulueta, *From Pain to Violence,* p. xi.

59. I use *parent* and *parental* to refer to the primary caregiver; the terms do not apply only to a biological parent.

60. Lopez et al., "Drug Use with Parents."

61. Robinson and Ryder, "Psychosocial Perspectives."

62. M. Brown ("Discourses of Choice") and Hussain et al. ("Violence in the Lives of Girls") are among the feminist researchers who do discuss perceptions of girls living outside of conventional family and neighborhood arrangements and their positions on the margins of social life and discourse.

63. De Zulueta, *From Pain to Violence,* p. xi.