Working With System-Involved Latinas: Moving Beyond Stereotypes and Cultural Deficit Thinking

Vera Lopez, PhD
Justice & Social Inquiry, School of Social Transformation, Arizona State University
Criminalization of Girls’ Coping Behaviors

- Girls are more likely to be
  - Petitioned and incarcerated for status offenses (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2013).
  - Arrested for prostitution
  - Arrested for assaults that are “family-centered” (Davis, 2007)
Criminalization of Latina Girls’ Coping Behaviors

- The juvenile justice system does a poor job of acknowledging the needs of Latinas whose behaviors are sometimes viewed with mistrust, derision, and suspicion (Lopez & Chesney-Lind, in press; Pasko & Lopez, in press; Schaffner, 2006).
Trauma Among System-Involved Girls

Abuse, Trauma, and Victimization → Drug Use → Juvenile Justice System
A recent study found that over 80 percent of girls met criteria for at least one disorder at probation intake compared to 67 percent of boys.

Girls had much higher rates of internalizing disorders, such as anxiety (girls: 56%; boys: 26.4%) and mood disorders (girls: 29.2%; boys: 14.3%).

While girls also had high rates of disruptive disorders (44.9%) and substance use disorders (43.2%), their rates were comparable with those of boys (51.3%-disruptive disorder; 55.1%-substance use disorders; Wasserman, McReynolds, Ko, Katz, & Carpenter, 2005).
According to a recent study, only 64% of youth with a diagnosed mental disorder and only 35% of youth with a diagnosed substance use disorder received treatment in the juvenile justice system (see Skowyra & Cocozza, 2007).
System-Involved Girls’ Mental Health & Substance Abuse Treatment

Table 2. Percent of girls in juvenile detention who reported mental health related issues in the past 12 months by race/ethnicity (N= 287)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>White (n = 88)</th>
<th>African American (n = 49)</th>
<th>Latina (n = 88)</th>
<th>Other (n = 50)</th>
<th>χ²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Been told by a counselor, social worker, or doctor that you have a mental illness or emotional problem</td>
<td>23 26.1</td>
<td>9 18.4</td>
<td>17 17.0</td>
<td>11 22.0</td>
<td>27.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been treated by a counselor, social worker, or doctor for a mental health problem</td>
<td>22 25.0</td>
<td>4 8.2</td>
<td>12 12.0</td>
<td>11 22.0</td>
<td>38.56*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been hospitalized for a mental health problem</td>
<td>14 15.9</td>
<td>3 6.1</td>
<td>2 2.0</td>
<td>3 6.0</td>
<td>23.64*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been prescribed medication of a mental health, emotional, or psychiatric problem</td>
<td>26 29.5</td>
<td>6 12.2</td>
<td>4 4.0</td>
<td>9 18.0</td>
<td>38.44*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Findings based on the authors’ analyses of the AARIN data. *p < .05
Stereotypes, Differential Treatment, and Girls of Color

- Despite the obvious links between girls’ victimization, substance use, mental health problems, and delinquency, juvenile justice personnel sometimes view system-involved girls with mistrust (Bond Maupin, Maupin, & Leisenring, 2002; Gaarder, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2004; Pasko & Lopez, 2015).
Stereotypes, Differential Treatment, and Girls of Color

In addition to gender, juvenile justice personnel rely on race/ethnicity and class to inform their impressions of system-involved youth (Holley & VanVleet 2006).

Ninety-six percent of staff members agreed that racial bias exists within the “system.”

A growing body of research suggests that juvenile justice personnel rely on gender, class, and racial/ethnic stereotypes when interacting with and making decisions that impact girls of color (Pasko & Lopez, in press; Schaffner, 2006).
Latina Girls and Stereotypes

- What are some stereotypes of Latina girls?
- What are some stereotypes of Latina girls’ parents?
- Where do these stereotypes come from?
- In what ways might these stereotypes influence youth professionals’ decisions about Latina girls care?
Commonly held stereotypes for Latina girls include being “dependent, submissive, family oriented, domestic, and highly sexual” (Nanda, 2012, p. 1531).

Several studies suggest that juvenile justice professionals rely on these stereotypes when talking about Latinas and their families (Pasko & Lopez, 2015; Lopez & Chesney-Lind & Lopez, in press).
Previous Studies

- Interviewed 62 juvenile justice professionals (clinicians, directors of residential treatment centers, case managers, probation officers, line staff, judges, and other legal professionals) about their perceptions of Latina girls in their care. *(Pasko & Lopez, 2015)*

- Focus groups with 8 clinical service providers who worked with system-involved Latina girls at a residential treatment center *(Lopez & Chesney-Lind, 2014)*

- Focus groups with 19 system-involved Latina girls with histories of drug use *(Lopez & Chesney-Lind, 2015)*

- Interviews with 42 justice-involved Latina girls with a history of drug use *(Lopez, forthcoming)*
I know some of the girls who always tell me that they aren’t in a gang, but they hang out with boys who are in a gang. They are really loyal to these boys…and that goes back to what we hear about Latinos and family relationships and values of relationships, collectivism…Girls can transpose that onto this gang, or negative peer group…especially when a lot of the people in the gang are family members…brothers, cousins, uncles… (Lopez & Chesney-Lind, in press)

The Hispanic girls who come in here are really hard, and I know they are more ganged up. They bring it in here. (Correctional Line Staff, Pasko & Lopez)

We watch them more closely because we know they are in a gang and I know a lot of Hispanic girls who are really good fighters, so with some, you know, you gotta watch them… (Correctional Line Staff, Pasko & Lopez)
Latina girls, well, they have more trouble with....not getting pregnant. That’s the only nice way I can put it. I see them trying to act all sexy, so so young now. (Probation Officer, Pasko & Lopez)

One thing that I noticed with several of the teen moms that I worked with, who were Hispanic, was that, some of the sexual risk taking behaviors was almost like setting forth an identity when they did become pregnant because motherhood is so embraced within the Hispanic community. So, they actually became a very valuable member of the family as a mother, I think. (Lopez & Chesney-Lind, in press)
When I was working with Happy Families, I saw two categories of girls that came my way. One category was the very good girls. Most of them had illegal immigrant boyfriends. They got pregnant; they stay to be the mother; and they do a great job at it...and usually the fathers have to go back (to Mexico) or they were here (U.S.) but struggling to find work. And then there were the other girls...my other girls were more Americanized...they would always have methamphetamine and substance abuse problems, and most of them came from homes where it was being used. So, I don’t think I ever had one that didn’t have family usage. So, it was always one or the other. (Clinical Service Provider, Lopez & Chesney-Lind, in press)
Always Pregnant

- For a variety of reasons, I think secure confinement is best (for Latina girls). They will run from (examples of non-secure facilities) and run to their man. At that point, I worry about pregnancy. I do. So, I know you have heard this many times before, a secure placement is the best for her in the end. It’s best for everybody, even her family. (Judge, Pasko & Lopez)

- I do consider girls' sexual choices to be a risk factor. It does bump them up on one domain (on their initial risk assessment) because it is all part of not taking responsibility. If she is out there (referring to sexual promiscuity)…that does not show she can take responsibility for her actions or show discipline, and usually this also means she is breaking the terms of her probation, with curfew or running or not going to school, sometimes, if she is in the life (prostitution), well, those behaviors are criminal offenses and she deserves revocation. (Probation Officer, Pasko & Lopez)
Hispanic girls are just more private (asked if it is because English is not the first language). No, it’s not because of translation problems. They are just more private. They don’t want to share what is going on and that really ties my hands, you know what I mean? If you won’t tell me about drugs or some emotional trouble or anything, then I can’t find you a better placement. I really think that is why we see more Hispanic girls going to detention. We cannot place them somewhere to get treatment if we don’t know what to treat. It’s frustrating. (Probation Officer, Pasko & Lopez)
Blaming Families, Especially Mothers

I find that a lot of the (girls’) moms are single themselves. They had many boyfriends, and they’re looking for a man to take care of them. They have their 13-, 12-year old daughter dating a 20-something year old man and they’re fine with that. Those are the moms that I usually meet when I go to court. (Lopez & Chesney-Lind, in press)

Some of my Hispanic moms are just the worse. They make it impossible to work with their daughters, either being passively resistant or just no-shows all together. So if the daughter has to complete court-ordered program and mom makes it hard for her to do that, either by not getting her here in time or letting the on-going fighting and crisis in the homes affect her attendance, well, that girl, she is not meeting the requirements of probation and she can be violated. Sent to [detention]. (Social Worker, Pasko & Lopez)
When Blaming, Influences Decisions

I know we are particularly harsh on Hispanic girls. Not just the assumptions...but without alternatives for them, without having a proper placement or even knowing the full extent of what is going on with them...it's tough. I do feel like they just sit in detention way more than the Caucasian girls I send (to detention). I feel like I get more of the story from the Caucasian girls. I also feel like Caucasian girls have more medical and psychiatric problems, whereas Hispanic girls...I see more family problems, young families...gangs, drugs...cannot send that to treatment. That requires more security. (Juvenile Court Judge, Pasko & Lopez)
Latina Girls’ Perspectives On How “Others” View Them

- They see us at the worst of everything...always pregnant, in gangs, on the street, using drugs.
I’ve been away from it [drugs] for almost three months before I came here because I spent a month in juvie, so it’s been three months that I’ve been away from it. And I’m not craving it. My body doesn’t want it. My body is not calling for it, but it’s just my mind that’s going to be messing with me. It’s just inside of my head ‘cause my body is not craving it, but I don’t think I’m going to mess up this time. It’s all going to be up to me. I don’t want to do it, and I’m not going to go back [to using drugs] because I’m better than that. I’m more hopeful this time. I believe in myself. I have faith and I’m a strong person. I can do whatever I want to do as long as I put my mind to it, you know, and I have to be patient cause nothing is going to happen all at once, take it step by step. (Latina Girl, Age 17)
I had a parole reinstatement meeting to see if I could go back into the community and I was given five more months here [Arroyo Verde]. They said that I’m not ready. I’m institutionalized I guess. They say I have antisocial traits so they’re trying to work with me to go through those things. Yes, I know I have antisocial traits. I know I’m institutionalized considering the fact that I’ve been here most of my teenage life. These people have seen me grow and mature. It’s kind of hard to break away from this. I’ll be 18 in December so they are going to release me two months before I’m 18 and send me to some type of independent living program. It’s pretty much all I know. Every time I think about leaving, I get this tight feeling like fear, but then I tell myself “You’re going to have to do it eventually,” but I’m not strong enough to deal with that right now. *(Latina Girl, Age 17)*
In what ways can we better support system-involved Latina girls and their families?
- At the individual level?
- At the agency level?
References


Complicated Lives
Girls, Parents, Drugs, and Juvenile Justice

VERA LOPEZ