

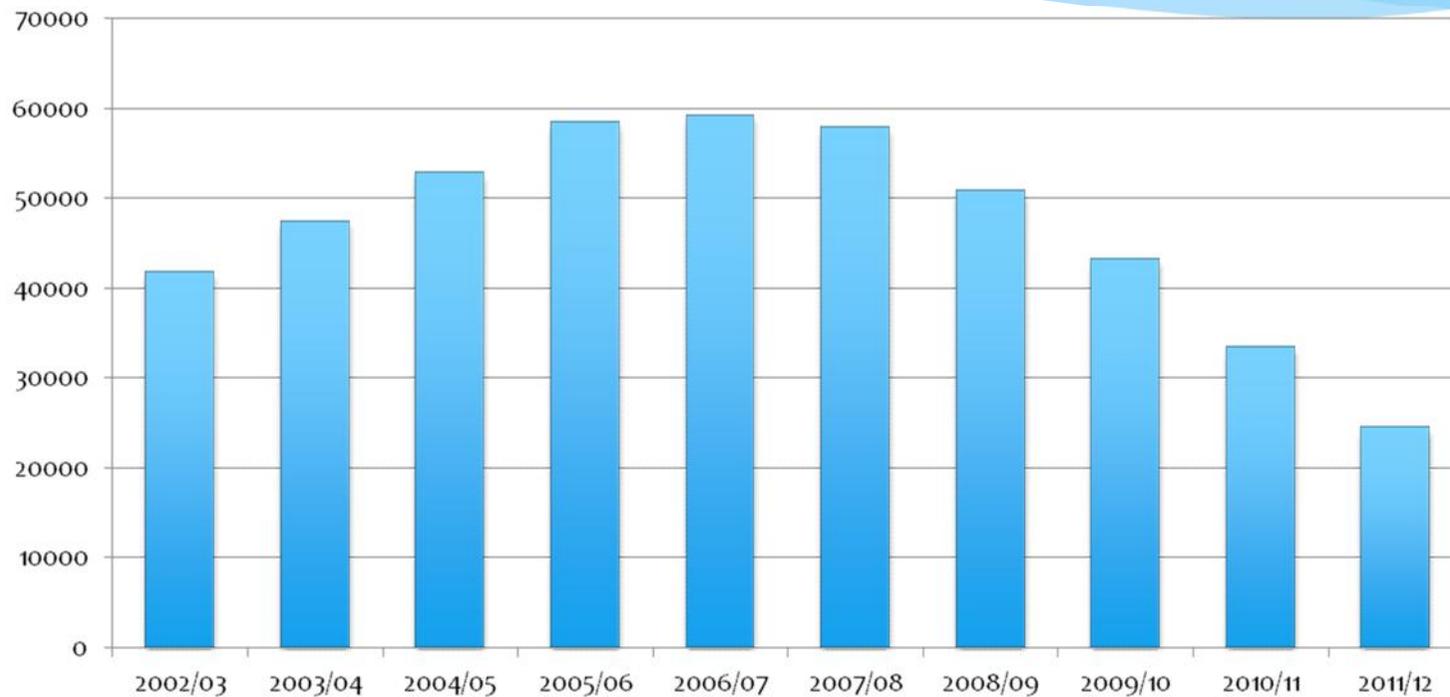
# Doing Justice to Offending Girls

Gilly Sharpe  
University of Sheffield  
[g.h.sharpe@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:g.h.sharpe@sheffield.ac.uk)

# 'New' offending girls?

- \* Youth justice system during most of 20<sup>th</sup> century preoccupied with reinforcing 'respectable' femininity and reforming 'waywardness'. Consequently girls' sexuality frequently criminalised while much of their ordinary law-breaking remained invisible.
- \* Late 2000s: increasing media pre-occupation with girls' violence, female binge-drinking, girls in gangs, etc. These concerns fuelled in part by apparent - but artefactual – rise in female youth crime.
- \* Mid-2010s: focus on child sexual exploitation, girls' vulnerabilities (e.g. girls at risk from gangs). Context of sharp drop in officially-recorded female youth crime (again, artefactual) and plethora of high-profile abuse / child sexual exploitation scandals.
- \* Enduring nexus between welfare and punishment, as well as risk/need confusion: young women as **RISKY** and **AT RISK**.

# Proven offences by females under 18, 2002/03 to 2011/12



Source: Youth Justice Board/MoJ annual Youth Justice statistics

# Offending Girls: Young Women and Youth Justice

- \* The study – 52 girls aged 13-19 yrs interviewed in 2005/06. All involved in youth justice system (8 in STC; 44 subject to YOT supervision). 36 women followed up and re-interviewed in 2011-13, aged 20-26 yrs.
- \* Girls'/women's views of youth justice: what works/matters and what doesn't? Perspectives as teenagers and again looking back as adults.



Sharpe, G. (2011) *Offending Girls: Young Women and Youth Justice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

# What helped and what didn't (as teenagers)

- \* Too little support, too late
- \* Abandonment by social workers (often conceptualised by girls as their own fault):
  - \* “[She] can’t be bothered coming round mine every week.” [Emily, 15]
  - \* “They said they’re doing all they can for us, and then closed the case.” [Charlie, 15]
- \* YOT support – in part due to its short duration – rarely effected change in young women’s everyday circumstances:
  - \* “You only see [YOT worker] like, once a week for half an hour, but when you leave you forget all about it.” [Zoë, 18]
  - \* “They don’t want you to get into trouble, but as soon as your referral order ends, you’ve still got nothing to do, and you’re in the same situation. So you’re still gonna keep on getting in trouble.” [Holly, 16]
- \* Same-sex worker important to many, but class and ‘knowing where we come from’ also important
- \* Support from informal/lay sources (e.g. mentor, resettlement worker, boxing coach) highly valued
- \* Community involvement (e.g. Prince’s Trust, army cadets, fire service) very popular, but rare in practice. Ceremonies and certificates valued – source of recognition and potential accreditation.
- \* Reparation generally indirect and experienced as ‘coerced restitution’, rather than offence resolution or restoration. Few understood its relevance, either to their own circumstances/rehabilitation or as a punishment.

# On reflection 6-8 years later...

- \* Adultification vs. infantilisation
- \* YOT should be harsher, like probation. Not a deterrent.
- \* “I think ‘cause it’s *youth* offending team, not probation, so they don’t give a shit. The youth offending don’t care because they’re kids, kids can’t tell them, they’re adults so they think they’re in the right. [...] They take you to McDonalds. It doesn’t matter, it’s all about McDonalds, things like that. [...] I mean half them kids that go to youth offending team have got kids themselves. And they’re talking to them like kids And that’s making them think, fuck you!”
- \* Probation very harsh and breach frequently. Some positive about this (you know where you stand); others - esp. those with child care responsibilities – perceived probation as illegitimate and gender-insensitive.

# Gender-specific services: some risks

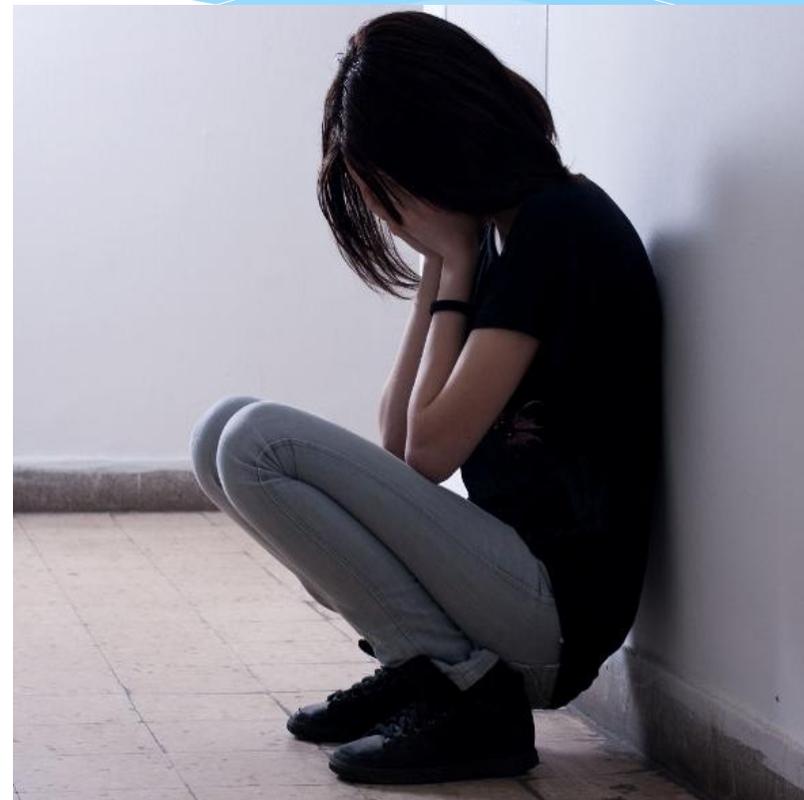
- Small numbers.
- Include 'at risk' girls? Net-widening?
- Short sentences.
- Iatrogenic effects of *any* youth justice system involvement (McAra and McVie, 2007).
- Possibility of even more 'therapeutic' sentencing... and breach!
- Essentialising young women and individualising their needs?
- Focus on gender-specific *needs* whilst sidelining gendered, classed and age-discriminatory *social injustices*?

# Contemporary endurance of the welfare/punishment nexus

- \* Girls/women tend to receive more restrictive community penalties than boys/men, case characteristics being otherwise equal
- \* Implications regarding enforcement and breach
- \* 'Protective' incarceration / 'therapeutic' sentencing
- \* Hybridisation of, or confusion between, risk and need:
  - \* "I think [welfare needs and criminogenic needs a]re hugely intertwined...Because arguably, if you look at the Asset, all of those things lead to risk of re-offending. Anything that proves to be a problem that is linked to risk of re-offending is also probably a welfare need." [Team Leader, female, Midshire YOT]
- \* Assessment of need in a risk-led penal context inevitably surrenders to the logic of risk reduction and the attendant risks of punishing individual(ised) welfare needs
- \* "Correctional interventions are prioritized according to what is pragmatic, rather than what may be meaningful to the offender but 'unachievable', because interventions hinge on broader social and structural inequalities, or gaps in services. [As a result, i]ndividuals are positioned as potential recipients of predefined services, rather than as active agents involved in processes of self-identifying needs." (Hannah-Moffat, 2005: 43)

# Restorative Justice with young women: critical reflections

- \* May encourage young women's self-blaming tendencies (NB. little relationship between expression of remorse/shame and successful desistance) – implications for self-esteem
- \* Girls historically considered particularly difficult group to work with - manipulative, recalcitrant, devious
- \* Histories of victimisation and asymmetry of law-breaking and victimisation experiences (and justice system responses)
- \* Conflicting perceptions (and realities) of 'victim' and 'offender' status, especially where both offender and victim are young women
- \* To what are we restoring young women?



# Encouraging desistance from crime

- \* Desistance is a *process*, not a discrete event – often characterised by relapse and ambivalence. Suggests a need for motivational work
- \* Education particularly important for women – route out of poverty, human capital, sense of achievement
- \* Desistance may be akin to ‘redemption’. ‘Redemption scripts’ (Maruna, 2001) are care-oriented, other-centred and focused on promoting the next generation: something to show for one’s life; recognition; respectability.
- \* Can involve finding s purpose through generative activities. (But risks reinforcing women’s caring roles). Support development of more positive ‘replacement self’ by accessing opportunities to make a positive contribution to local communities (e.g. volunteering).
- \* But stigma may be very enduring and label/reputation of ‘criminal woman’ (also ‘bad mother’) very difficult to shake off, making ‘straight’ identity particularly hard to achieve for women.

# Implications for desistance-focused practice

- \* Need to help women offenders develop social capital (opportunities and systems of social support) as well as human capital (capacities and individual skills). Suggests an advocacy role for practitioners seeking to support change. Underlines need to target systems *beyond* the individual lawbreaker.
- \* Desistance may be helped by someone 'believing in' the lawbreaker – importance of consistent worker(s) sustaining optimistic and persistent approach through periods of relapse
- \* Reciprocity and mutual support/normal-smithing.
- \* Importance of relationships but relationships not the only important thing... also beware danger of blaming girls/women for their bad relationship 'choices'.

# Potential of the arts for facilitating desistance amongst (young) women

- \* **Non-stigmatising**; not YOT or probation – delivery from within mainstream services or settings ideal
- \* Builds **social capital**: increased self-confidence, expanded horizons
- \* Fosters **collaboration** and **negotiation**
- \* **Relationship development** – with other participants and project leaders/facilitators
- \* **Wellbeing**: influences individuals' ability to thrive, relate to others, develop increased sense of autonomy, self-confidence and self-respect (in context of high incidence of abuse, exploitation, IPV, self-harm, etc.)
- \* Can increase participants' sense of **hope** for the future
- \* **Critical education through the arts... focus on individuals' self-development AND shared experiences of social injustice**

# Critical education: a strategy for increasing justice for girls

- \* Broad aim of exposing – and ameliorating – structural patriarchal and anti-youth systems resulting in failures to protect girls and to respond to those who abuse/neglect/violate them
- \* Educational aim of empowerment – orientation towards social action and social change
- \* Help young women in trouble with the law to:  
*“make sense of their biographies by analysing the ways in which larger social forces have shaped their families, communities and individual life chances [such that] attempting to change social structure becomes the intervention (Goddard and Myers 2011: 662-3).*
- \* Bring young women together across agency boundaries