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Gender: An Important Factor in the Implementation of Services for Juvenile Offenders

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Introduction

The Child Welfare League of America (2003) reported that between 1980 and 2000 the arrest rate for boys declined by 11% but increased for girls by 35%. A well tested case management approach being applied more commonly in juvenile justice is the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) approach, which suggests that interventions and services should be commensurate with ones level of risk and specific dynamic risk factors (*criminogenic needs*). The RNR model tends to be seen as "gender-neutral", based on the assumption that it works equally well with both sexes. Few studies have examined whether gender differences exist in the effectiveness of RNR-type case planning.

Vitopoulos et al., (2012) examined possible RNR differences between justice-involved boys and girls using the Youth Level of Service/ Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI). Across all of the criminogenic need areas (e.g. antisocial attitudes, peer affiliations), only the personality domain was significantly different by gender, such that more girls than boys seemed to have a problem in this area. They did not find any gender differences in the matching of services to needs identified; however, a higher match between clinician-recommended needs and assigned treatment services (service-to-needs match) predicted a decrease in boys' re-offending but not in girls' reoffending. Given the paucity of research, we are left to question the applicability of some RNR principles or the quality of their implementation for girl offenders. Using the Structured Assessment of Violence Risk for Youth (SAVRY) in three probation offices to measure both risk level and dynamic risk factors (*criminogenic needs*), we examined whether within a large sample of youth there were gender differences in the (a) criminogenic needs identified, (b) ability of probation officers (POs) to match services to needs in their case planning, and (c) the association of the service-need match to recidivism.

Method

Sample

The sample comprised 358 adjudicated youth (96 females and 262 males) who received a SAVRY assessment prior to, or just after, their disposition. The sample was primarily African American (78.2%) and the age of youth was 15 years old ($SD = 1.8$). No significant differences were found between girls and boys on age or race.

Materials

To identify criminogenic need areas, the dynamic risk factors on the SAVRY were categorized into six areas based on their face validity initially and were modified until an acceptable alpha level was achieved. The six need areas are: Disruptive Behavior Problems, Mental Health/Emotional Stability, Substance Use, Family Problems, Education, and Negative Peer Associations. Probation officers (POs) were trained to use a checklist with SAVRY items to determine which need areas were most prominent for each youth.

Procedure

All services received by youths were recorded for a minimum of eight months while they were on probation or until the time they reoffended; whichever came first. A codebook was created for making the *service-to-need match* ratings. Ratings factored in the type of service, length of time in the service, completion status associated with that service, and intensity level of the service. A *good match* was defined as having receiving a service when a need was identified or receiving no service when a need was not identified. A *bad match* was defined as having not received a service when a need was identified or receiving a service when no need was identified. A *percentage match variable* was calculated to represent how well assigned services met the criminogenic need areas of youth. This variable was computed by dividing the total number of matched needs by the total number of need areas that could have been identified by the SAVRY ($n=6$). The percentage match variable ranged from 0% to 100%, with a mean of 51% ($SD=24\%$).

Thirty cases were randomly selected to establish interrater reliability for matching services to need level. Intraclass Correlation Coefficients (ICC_c) indicated high rater agreement with values of .92 or higher for each need area.

Petition data were obtained from both juvenile and adult court records. Recidivism was defined as a new petition following the initial SAVRY administration for each youth. New offenses were categorized as: (a) *violent* (actual, attempted, or threatened harm to another), (b) *nonviolent* (any nonviolent offense, e.g. drug offenses), and (c) *any reoffending* (all types). Follow-up periods ranged from 7 to 26 months ($M = 18.2$ months, $SD = 3.4$ months).

Results

Gender and Service-to-Need Matching

Boys had significantly more needs identified by the SAVRY ($M = 3.6, SD = 1.8$) than girls ($M = 3.2, SD = 1.9$; $t(356) = -2.1, p = .03$. Substance Use and Negative Peer Associations needs were identified significantly more often in boys than girls (see Table 1).

Overall, no gender differences were found when looking at the percentage match variable. That is, boys ($M = 49.8, SD = 24.0$) and girls ($M = 55.2, SD = 24.5$) both had approximately half of all their needs met with an appropriate intensity service; ($t(356) = 1.9, p = .06$). With respect to the service-to-need match, only the Negative Peer Associations need rendered significant gender differences for good matches (receiving a service when a need is identified or receiving no service when a need is not identified). Girls were significantly more likely than boys to have a good match for the Negative Peer Associations need area (46.9% v. 34.4%; $\chi^2(1) = 4.69, p = .03$).

Recidivism and Matching

Boys were significantly more likely than girls to commit any reoffense or to nonviolently reoffend (see Table 2). To examine the Associations between service-to-needs matching (*good match vs. bad match*) and reoffense by gender, we ran separate analyses for boys and girls. The results show that there were no significant differences between boys who reoffended and those who did not on how well their needs were met by services (see Table 3). Conversely, for girls, there were two significant differences between reoffenders and non-reoffenders. Girls who committed any type of reoffense were more likely to not have had their Education need met (32.7% than girls who did not reoffend (53.3%; $\chi^2(1) = 3.93, p = .05$). The opposite Associations was found for the Negative Peer Associations need area: girls that re-offended were more likely to have a good match (61.3% than those who did not (40.0%; $\chi^2(1) = 3.82, p = .05$).

Table 1: Youth with needs identified across all SAVRYs by Gender

| | Boys | Girls | t-test/ χ^2 |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Disruptive Behavior Problems | 66.4% | 61.5% | $\chi^2(1) = 0.76, p = .38$ |
| Mental Health/Emotional Stability | 59.2% | 56.2% | $\chi^2(1) = 0.26, p = .62$ |
| Substance Use | 45.4% | 26% | $\chi^2(1) = 11, p = .001^*$ |
| Family Problems | 45.4% | 45.8% | $\chi^2(1) = .005, p = .95$ |
| Education | 67.6% | 57.3% | $\chi^2(1) = 3.25, p = .07$ |
| Negative Peer Associations | 80.5% | 70.8% | $\chi^2(1) = 3.85, p = .05^*$ |
| Total Number of Needs | $M = 3.6, SD = 1.8$ | $M = 3.2, SD = 1.9$ | $t(356) = -2.1, p = .03^*$ |

Table 2: Gender Differences in Reoffense Rates

| | Any | | | Violent | | | Nonviolent | | |
|-----------------|--------|--------|-----------------|---------|-------|-----------------|------------|--------|-----------------|
| | Boys | Girls | $\chi^2(1) =$ | Boys | Girls | $\chi^2(1) =$ | Boys | Girls | $\chi^2(1) =$ |
| Reoffense Rates | 44.7%* | 32.3%* | 4.43, $p = .03$ | 16.0% | 9.4% | 2.55, $p = .11$ | 37.0%* | 21.9%* | 7.30, $p = .01$ |

Table 3: Good Service-to-Need Matching by Gender: Reoffenders versus Non-Reoffenders

| | Any Recidivism | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Boys | | | Girls | | |
| | Good Match | Non-Reoffenders | $\chi^2(1) =$ | Good Match | Non-Reoffenders | $\chi^2(1) =$ |
| Disruptive Behavior Problems | 51.3% | 49.7% | | 0.07, $p = .79$ | 51.6% | |
| Mental Health/Emotional Stability | 51.3% | 51.0% | 0.00, $p = .97$ | 48.4% | 50.8% | 0.05, $p = .83$ |
| Substance Use | 71.8% | 69.7% | 0.14, $p = .71$ | 80.6% | 75.4% | 0.33, $p = .57$ |
| Family Problems | 53.0% | 56.6% | 0.33, $p = .57$ | 61.3% | 60.0% | 0.02, $p = .90$ |
| Education | 41.0% | 34.5% | 1.18, $p = .28$ | 32.3%* | 53.3%* | 3.93, $p = .05$ |
| Negative Peer Associations | 34.2% | 34.5% | 0.00, $p = .96$ | 61.3%* | 40.0%* | 3.82, $p = .05$ |

Conclusions

Similar to previous findings, no significant differences emerged for gender and percentage match. In other words, POs were equally good at matching services to needs for both boys and girls. Thus, there did not appear to be a gender bias in implementation of the RNR approach. There was a gender difference, however, in the relation between matching needs to services and later reoffending. Unexpectedly, for boys the service-to-need match had no associations with later offending. In other words, boys were just as likely to reoffend regardless of whether they did or did not have their needs appropriately met. This is contrary to prior research with juveniles. It is possible our null findings were due to poor service-to-need matching overall.

Conversely for girls, failure to adequately address the education need was associated with higher reoffending. Surprisingly, also for girls, addressing the Negative Peer Associations need was associated with a greater likelihood of reoffending. It is possible the peer contagion effects for girls involved in the juvenile justice system are so strong that most peer-related services can make girls worse.