

Girl Gangs: Are Girls Getting More Violent?

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The [Chicago Crime Commission's](#) latest report loudly informs the public that there are female gangs in Chicago. Lots of them. But the female gangs described in this report bear little resemblance to the real deal. The report plays a dangerous game by combating denial with demonization.

The worst thing about the Crime Commission's report is its sensationalist and false portrayal of rising violence among women and girls in gangs. Reading this report gives the public the idea that the female gang problem is basically about violence – that girls are almost as violent as men, and in some ways, even worse!

Well, as we say in Wisconsin, "If cows could fly there'd be milk from heaven." The report's main findings are about as believable as a flying cow. Let's look at three:

The Crime Commission says women are becoming more violent.

The facts: Homicide by women nationally is falling dramatically. For example, among African-American women aged 18-24, the age group with the most homicides, murder rates have fallen more than 30 percent over the past 20 years. Instead of girls getting more violent, they are killing less.

The Crime Commission says female gang violence in Chicago is getting worse.

The facts: In the years 1987-1994, the last years for which data was available, there was only one homicide by a female gang member acting

alone – and only 12 where a woman was part of a group of people charged with murder. But what has increased, according to the Illinois Criminal Justice Authority, is violence against women. Gang girls are much more at risk of being killed than killing.

The Crime Commission says that violent crime among women is increasing faster than among men.

The facts: The actual number of violent crimes by women is so low that even small increased result in what looks like big percentage gain. Research in Milwaukee and other cities finds that while gang girls may fight as much as boys, they use guns much less and almost never fire a gun or kill. To say the violence gender gap is narrowing is a statistical trick used to obscure the fact that men continue to kill at rates about ten times as great as women.

What does the report recommend? For one, it wants male police officers to be allowed to “frisk” girls in gangs – and every dirty old man knows what that’s going to mean. The report also wants new laws that would make it illegal for gang members to “corrupt their children.”

But who is going to decide what it means to “corrupt” children? Maybe we should hold an investigation into what the Gold Coast elite teach their children about race, gender, and poverty? Couldn’t we define racist and sexist ideas as “corrupting youth?”

To be fair, the Chicago Crime Commission does point out that we do not have adequate program assistance for girls in gangs. But their list of existing programs is lost among lurid illustrations of gang hand signs, posed pictures of threatening gangsters, scary case studies, and fictionalized stories. Yes, girls need better education and more good jobs.

But girls in gangs also need programs to address sexual exploitation, like a “safe house” to provide a refuge for those girls who are victimized by their gang, family, or others; more outreach and counseling programs which hire former female gang members to reach out to their sisters; and more preventative measures, like expanding the number and scope of health clinics within schools where young girls can be counseled about drug use, questions about sexuality, and other health concerns. Identifying and helping gang kids through the public health system

would be a big improvement over the usual criminalization of teenage alienation and rebellion.

We all know that gangbanging and drug dealing isn't a good way to live for girls – or boys. But high profile reports like those of the Chicago Crime Commission have a responsibility to do more than sensationalize, stigmatize, and demonize. This report is more part of the problem than part of the solution.