Female offending and youth justice interventions: A review of literature

Technical Report 24

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INTRODUCTION

Crime rates are trending downwards in Aotearoa New Zealand. This includes apprehension rates for children and young people, which have remained steady or decreased over the last 20 years (Ministry of Justice, 2015). Within the youth apprehension statistics, females comprise a minority of youth offenders. In Aotearoa New Zealand, one in five young offenders is female (Ministry of Justice, 2015; Statistics NZ, 2016). The apprehension rate for all offences for females is decreasing, and for violent offences has fallen sharply in recent years (Statistics NZ, 2016). International research also shows that females commit less serious crimes, are involved in crime over shorter periods of time, and present lower risk of harm to others (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Best, 2013 (NZ); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK)). It has been argued that female offending forms a response to emotional and relational issues, and that a high proportion of offending females are victims of abuse or trauma. However, the lower numbers of young female offenders has meant that political and academic attention has focused on males, and the particular needs of females have not been well-considered in youth justice systems (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Criminal Justice Joint Inspection [CJJI](UK), 2014; Fitzgerald et al., 2012 (Australia)). There is also relatively little published research in New Zealand detailing profiles of young female offenders, or of effective gender-responsive interventions and strategies (Best, 2013 (NZ); Lynch, 2014 (NZ)). However, Swift’s (2011; 2014a (NZ)) recent examination of young women’s violent and anti-social behaviour in the Tasman Policing District of New Zealand, highlights the role that wider risk factors play in contributing to this and suggests community responses.

Worldwide, juvenile justice systems have developed primarily in response to male offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); CJJI, 2014
It has been suggested that interventions designed to meet the needs of males may not be effective in meeting the needs of females (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). A growing body of literature now advocates for the need to respond to differing and specific needs of offending females, in order to be effective (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Best, 2013 (NZ); Walker et al., 2016 (US)).

This literature review examines national and international literature on offending by young females and intervention programmes considered to be effective with females. Databases including Scopus, Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar were searched using a combination and variations of the terms ‘females’, ‘offending’, ‘intervention’, ‘programme’, ‘gender’, ‘responsive’, ‘juvenile’, ‘justice’, ‘delinquency’, ‘crime’, ‘female’, ‘young’, ‘women’, and ‘youth’. The resulting literature was reviewed and refined to those which covered the characteristics and profiles of young female offenders, or the characteristics and effectiveness of practice and interventions with females, including gender-specific practice.

The review begins with a discussion of young women’s pathways into offending, focusing on familial, contextual and individual risk factors that increase the likelihood of offending. It also considers protective factors which may reduce the likelihood of offending by reducing risk exposure, and it explores key differences between males and females who offend. This literature suggests while that females and males share many risk factors for offending, it remains unclear regarding the reasons for the gender gap in offending rates. Some authors emphasise that females experience a greater number of risks and as such have higher rates of mental illness, abuse and victimisation, and family conflict but it is not clear why this does not translate into equal or higher rates of offending (Fagan et al., 2007(US); Fagan & Lindsey, 2014 (US); Walker et al., 2016 (US)).
Females are also recognised as having higher levels of welfare need, specifically related to the prevalence of and their vulnerability to abuse and victimisation (CJJI, 2014 (UK)). There appear to be a set of complex interactions between risk and protective factors; it is not possible to identify one explanatory factor or group of factors that predict female entry into, continuation of, and desistance from offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009). Nonetheless, there are increasing calls to account for differences between young female offenders and both young male and adult women offenders, in addition to recognising the heterogeneity within the young female offending population (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); van der Put, et al., 2014 (Netherlands).

Secondly, the review discusses current responses to females’ offending, in particular gender-responsive interventions, and characteristics of effective practice are explored. Offending by young females has received very little study in comparison to males, leaving little guiding theory or evidence regarding the most effective interventions (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). There is some evidence about interventions that are effective more generally in youth justice, but no clear patterns regarding the types of programmes that are most effective by gender (Fagan & Lindsey, 2014(US)). While gender-specific programmes have increased in popularity, there is still a very small evidence base regarding justice interventions that work for females (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 UK); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Zahn et al. 2009(US)). Some research argues that interventions which focus on background needs young people who offend have, such as elevated family and neighbourhood risks, challenges in participating in mainstream education and problematic peer relationships are valuable for both females and males (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). The review presents core components which characterise best practice in gender-responsive youth justice systems. These include acknowledging the links between trauma and females’
offending, community-based programmes and diversion mechanisms, and support for young females as they transition into adulthood.

**RISK FACTORS FOR FEMALES’ OFFENDING**

There is a growing interest in understanding the factors that shape the involvement of young females in offending. A range of specific risk factors which may predict females’ offending have been identified. The vast majority of this literature is concerned with identifying the links between victimisation/abuse and offending. This work grows out of earlier research which showed high levels of past abusive experiences for adult women offenders (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). These risk factors which have been retrospectively linked to offending by females cover a wide group of characteristics (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)), and on the basis of these patterns seen in adult women’s offending histories it is concluded that many females within youth justice systems have also been exposed to high levels of abuse, violence and neglect (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). There is a widely-held assumption that the experiences of young female offenders and adult women offenders are homogeneous. Furthermore, as a result of small numbers of offending females, there is a tendency to consider all females and their offending as the same (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)).

The risk factors and processes which increase the likelihood of females’ future involvement in offending are discussed here, in addition to protective factors which may mitigate the role these risk factors play in offending. The research reviewed presents risk factors including abuse and victimisation, criminal associations and peer relationships, family dysfunction, poverty, lack of engagement in education, welfare involvement, mental health and alcohol and drug issues, and service provision/structural disadvantage. Rather than a simple cause-effect relationship between a single risk factor and
offending, current thinking suggests that the clustering together of a number of risk factors undperin offending behaviour (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). That is, females’ pathways into youth justice systems are a result of interrelated and intergenerational risk factors that accumulate around young females propelling them into offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Quinn & Poirier, 2005 (US)).

Abuse and victimisation

Relationships between abuse and offending are well-established – where trauma is present, levels of delinquency are elevated over that of the general population (Smith et al., 2006 (US)). Retrospective studies have shown high levels of past abuse in the adult female offending population, indicating a link beween abuse and offending in adult women (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). Within populations of adult female inmates, women convicted of violent crimes have been found to experience significantly more physical and sexual abuse as children and to experience higher rates of abuse as women, than those convicted of non-violent crimes (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). A longitudinal Australian study linked childhood sexual abuse with low-level offending in women and found that childhood sexual abuse was predictive of aggressive behaviour in women (Swanston et al., 2003 (Australia)). In this regard, offending behaviour is seen as a symptom of trauma.

While experience of abuse and trauma is a common factor linked to offending behaviour and involvement in youth justice systems generally, for females it has been identified as a primary factor (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). A significant proportion of females at risk of offending and those with offending behaviour have experienced abuse (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2014; Espinosa & Sorenson, 2016 (US); Sharpe, 2009 (UK); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). A piece of influential and heavily quoted work by Acoca
and Dedel (1999 (US)) established links between victimisation and offending. Acoca and Dedel (1999) reported particularly high rates of abuse in samples of young female offenders, and that 92% of females interviewed had been subjected to some form of emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse.

A history of neglect and abuse often contributes to offending behaviour and involvement in youth justice systems. In a study by Belknap and Holsinger (2006 (US)) incarcerated females themselves identified their own victimisation as a primary cause of their offending. As Bloom and Covington (2001 (US)) suggest, psychological trauma resulting from sexual exploitation and abuse of adolescent and pre-adolescent females can lead them to ‘act out’ criminally. Stressful life events play a precipitatory role in the development of mental health disorders such as anxiety and mood disorders. There is increasing evidence that childhood abuse can increase vulnerability to mental illness, both are frequently found in female prison inmate populations. Quinn and Poirer (2005 (US)) explain that a childhood background of abuse can lead to depression, suicide, posttraumatic stress disorder, running away, sexually transmitted infections, prostitution, and violence. These are seen as symptoms or behaviours that stem from abuse, ultimately leading to offending and custodial placements of females (Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)). Females are often punished for this disruptive, violent or anti-social behaviour that stems from abuse at home.

According to van der Put and colleagues (2014 (Netherlands)), experience of abuse was related to the type of crime committed: females who committed low level offences such as shoplifting were more likely to have had experiences of abuse and victimisation than those convicted of violent crimes. In Acoca and Dedel’s (1999 (US)) study, females whose lives had been disrupted with many experiences of trauma and abuse had committed offences that were
of a low level nature. Widom and Maxfield (2001) also found that females who had histories of abuse and neglect were 73 percent more likely than control group females to be arrested for property, alcohol and drug, and misdemeanour offenses.

However, others have linked charges for violent behaviour to prior victimisation at home (Molnar et al., 2005). It has been suggested that females who have a history of emotional, sexual and/or physical abuse or neglect are twice as likely to be apprehended for violent crimes than females who have not experienced neglect or abuse (Widom & Maxfield, 2001 (US)). Lederman and colleagues (2004 (US)) reported that females with histories of abuse and maltreatment had higher rates of running away. Johansson and Kempf-Leonard (2009 (US)) found females who had previously run away had increased likelihood of engaging in serious, violent and chronic offending. There is also evidence that females with a history of sexual abuse are more likely to have higher level offending and more extreme outcomes than those without past sexual abuse (Goodkind et al., 2006 (US); Wareham & Dembo, 2007 (US)). Victimisation or maltreatment (including child physical and/or sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and exposure to domestic violence) has also been linked to recidivism (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). In sum, exposure to trauma increases the risk of females both internalising (depression, anxiety) and externalising (aggression, oppositional defiance) their problems (Ford et al., 2012).

While abuse is recognised as increasing the risks of offending exactly how victimisation influences offending is unclear; it has been hard to establish causal links between abuse and offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). While the population of young female offenders report elevated rates of abuse, the patterning of abuse and victimisation related to offending is complex. There may be other factors which mediate the relationship between victimisation and offending (Arnull
Exact mechanisms of the relationships between experiences of abuse and offending, and any causal pathways, are unclear and not well-understood. It is difficult to adequately test causal relationships between experiences of abuse and offending behaviour. For example, where research has used samples of adult female offenders to establish a link between abuse and offending, it is not possible to determine the rate of children who were sexually abused who do not go on to offend as adults. Similarly, it is not possible to determine the proportion of sexually abused children who do not offend. Furthermore, the relationship established between abuse and offending has largely come out of the United States, and focused on specific subgroups. Many, for instance, focus on young females and women in custody; however, most offending by females is low-level and so focusing on those in custody may give a skewed picture that is not representative of the female offending population as a whole (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). Despite these limitations, there is a consensus that victimisation plays an important role in precipitating offending by females.

**Peer relationships and criminal associations**

Difficult peer relationships and parental offending have also been found to play a significant role in female youth offending. Relationships are well recognised as playing an important role in females’ lives (for example, Cooney et al. (US), 2008; Garcia & Lane, 2010 (US); Gilligan et al., 1991 (US); Hipwell & Loeber, 2006 (US); Matthews & Hubbard, 2008 (US); Swift, 2011 (NZ)). Disruptive or violent females may experience more difficult relationships with peers, and may experience more rejection by their peer group (Hipwell & Loeber, 2006). Moreover, Hipwell and Loeber (2006 (US)) note that peer rejection is a strong predictor for chronic antisocial behaviour.
There is also a relationship between offending and associating with others who offend (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). Having relationships with disruptive or delinquent peers has been identified as an important predictor of the evolution of disruptive behaviour among females (Leve et al., 2015 (US); Millar et al., 2009 (US)). For example, Millar et al. (2009) found that peer delinquency predicted disruptive behaviour among seven and eight year old females. In their review of the predictors of female delinquency, Zahn and colleagues (2010) noted that young people’s social connections may provide them with ‘training’ in delinquent behaviour, through modelling aggressive behaviour in a situation where social disapproval is not present.

More specifically, being in an intimate relationship with males who offend, often indicates offending behaviours in females (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). Studies of young female offenders show that they are more likely to identify males as their closest friends (Solomon, 2006 (US)) and more likely to have romantic relationships with males who are several years older (Cauffman et al., 2008 (US); Lederman et al., 2004 (US); Solomon, 2006 (US)). Solomon (2006) found that, compared with a matched sample of females who were not involved with the youth justice system, females who were involved with the youth justice system were more likely to identify males as their closest friends (35 percent of youth justice involved females, compared with five percent of non-involved females). Of the 35 percent of the youth justice involved females who identified a male as their closest friend, 53 percent reported that the male was at least three years older than them. Intimate relationships with older males can be a particular risk factor for females. This can increase females’ risk of delinquent behaviour, particularly if the male is also involved with delinquent behaviour (Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). Schaffner (2006 (US)) found that even though many young women talked about how controlling, protective, or possessive their older partners were, they
believed these relationships were good for them as the alternative was dealing with abuse, hunger or homelessness. An older partner became a surrogate parent figure, “taking care” of them by providing resources such as food, shelter, and clothing, as well as beauty products, cigarettes and so on (Schaffner, 2006). Some authors (see for example, Cauffman et al., 2008 (US)) suggest, however, that associations with offending may be more strongly linked to how much the partner encourages offending, rather than the age of the partner. Arnull and Eagle (2009 (UK)) also found that often young female offenders became involved in criminal activity such as substance misuse or violence as a result of their boyfriend’s offending.

Parental criminality has also been identified as a factor that increases females’ risks of offending. Studies of at-risk females and retrospective studies of females within the system (Leve et al., 2015 (US)) have noted that where a parent is involved in criminal behaviour, this increases the likelihood of their daughters becoming involved in the youth justice system. For example, in one study (Lederman et al., 2004 (US)) nearly two-thirds of female offenders reported that they had a parent or close family member also involved in the criminal justice system.

**Challenging family circumstances and risks confronted within the family**

The family context has been suggested to be both a key risk and protective factor for females (Bloom et al., 2002 (US)). Many females who offend come from unstable families and adverse environments, characterised by chaos and interpersonal conflict (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)). The specific factors within families that have been identified as contributing to females’ offending include witnessing family violence, family break-up, conflict
with parents, and harsh parenting styles (Scaffner, 2006 (US); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)).

Females who reside in violent and chaotic home environments show heightened risk factors for offending. In their 1997 study of females involved with the youth justice system in California, Acoca and Dedel (1999 (US)) found that 59 percent of the females they interviewed identified problematic family relationships as one of the primary reasons they became involved with delinquency and crime. Females’ aggression has been linked to exposure to dysfunctional domestic relationships and violent home environments – females are much more likely to commit violent offences when they have witnessed family violence (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). For example, Herrera and McCloskey (2001 (US)) reported that females who had witnessed interparental violence or been subject to abuse were more than seven times more likely to be referred to the youth justice system because they had committed a violent act, compared to females from an age-matched community sample who had not been exposed to intimate partner violence. Dennehy’s (2005 (NZ)) Christchurch-based analysis of adult women who were perpetrators of violence retrospectively highlighted a number of factors that may produce a propensity for female violence. These factors included the presence of parental domestic violence during childhood, surviving sexual abuse, and child welfare service involvement, including foster care, during childhood and adolescence. Swift’s (2011 (NZ)) study of girls’ violence suggested that when not protected from witnessing or experiencing family violence by their parents, and especially their mothers, females learn that they have to fend for themselves and resort to violence to physically and emotionally protect themselves.

The effects of parental dysfunction, repeated separations/disrupted attachment and subsequent attachment difficulties are all prevalent themes in the development of aggression and violence in young
people (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006 (US); Dennehy (NZ), 2005; Green, Peters & Associates, 1998 (US); Moretti et al., 2004 (US); Swift, 2011 (NZ)). Bowlby’s (1973) founding work on attachment noted that the most violent, angry and dysfunctional responses are all elicited in children and adolescents who experience repeated separations, and or, are constantly subjected to the threat of being abandoned. Young women who have experienced unresponsive or disrupted attachments often enter adolescence with a distorted “deficit” sense of self, seeking security in their relationships with others and devising sexual solutions to non-sexual problems (Moretti et al., 2004 (US)). For example, a girl may acquire a new boyfriend as a response to needing somewhere to stay, or she may go out partying and looking for a partner when problems with home life, money or family seem unresolvable (Schaffner, 2006 (US)). Arnull and Eagle (2009 (UK)) state that low levels of parental supervision increase the likelihood of offending behaviour in females. Field (2004 (Australia) suggests that there are also overt connections between females’ offending, their experience of violence, and family break-up. Incarcerated females are more likely than non-incarcerated females to have experienced breakdown of parental relationships, and bereavement (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK)). Arnull and Eagle (2009) (UK) found that females, who were living with their mother and stepfather, or their single father, had higher levels of offending than those who lived with their single mother.

Harsh parenting and punishment has also been identified as a risk factor to multiple mental health problems (such as disruptive behaviour and conduct disorders), and in turn is associated with increased offending by females (Loeber et al., 2009 (US); Millar et al., 2009 (US); Williams & Steinberg, 2011 (US)). Miller et al. (2009 (US)) identify two key domains of parenting that shaped females’ disruptive behaviour: low parental warmth and harsh discipline. Delinquent females viewed conflict with their mothers as the most...
critical problem in their lives (Gaarder & Hesselton, 2012 (US)).

**Poverty**

Poverty and socio-economic status has been offered as an explanation of females’ offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). Consideration of poverty issues has been limited, but some authors suggest the vast majority of offending by females is poverty-related (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Field, 2004 (Australia); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Molnar et al., 2005 (US)). The broader picture shows that neighbourhoods and communities where there are higher rates of material deprivation have higher rates of arrests for crime (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). Molnar et al. (2005 (US)) found that being victims of violent crime or sexual assault, as well as concentrated poverty, was associated with aggressive behaviour by young females, suggesting an influence of both victimisation and neighbourhood context. Sherman and Balck (2015 (US)) link housing and child welfare policies to residential instability, which in turn has a negative impact on females’ social, education and health outcomes and is closely connected to risks of offending.

**Lack of educational achievement**

Disengagement from school has also been linked to increased risks of offending by females (Lederman et al., 2004 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). Offending females’ educational histories are characterised by disruption, poor engagement in learning (high rates of suspensions and exclusions), low rates of participation (such as persistent non-attendance or truancy), and leaving school early (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK)). Other literature also suggests that females involved in offending experience weak attachments to school. Females report poor relationships with teachers and that
education systems did not meet their learning or emotional needs (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)). Rejection by schools has been linked to increases in delinquent behaviour. It has been observed that when schools do not foster a sense of belonging among students, they seek identity and attachment elsewhere, and this most often is with offending peers (Sanders & Munford, 2016 (NZ)).

**Welfare involvement**

A very high proportion of youth justice-involved females have previously been placed in state care or had involvement with welfare agencies (Lederman et al., 2004 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US); Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)). Those who have been in care offend at levels up to two and a half times more than those not in care (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). Quinn and Poirer (2005 (US)) noted that, as a group, females often experience multiple out-of-home placements. Quinn and Poirer explain, “Females frequently experience multiple out-of-home placements, whether in foster care or in residential treatment. Typically, they have difficulties in transitioning to each setting, and they run away, at which point they may be placed in a different home or facility. Finding acceptable placements for girls who have been abused is notoriously difficult they are the girls who are understandably mistrusting and have difficulty bonding” (p. 127). Importantly, transitions between caregiver placements during early and middle childhood have been associated with females’ involvement in youth justice systems (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). For example, disruptions in placements (change from one foster home to another) for females aged between 11 and 12 years resulted in delinquency problems two years later, including smoking, drugs and early engagement in sexual activity (Kim et al., 2013 (US)).
Mental health, substance use disorders, and sexual and physical health problems

Females in youth justice systems have high levels of mental health problems (Sherman & Balck, 2015(US)). Internationally, prevalence rates of mental health diagnoses are significantly higher for females with youth justice system involvement than the general population (Zahn et al., 2010(US)). These disproportionately high rates are in part expected given victimisation through childhood abuse (Quinn & Poirer, 2005(US)). Similarly, a significant proportion of offending females have co-occurring substance abuse issues, and sexual and physical health problems.

Mental health disorders are ubiquitous in youth justice populations, with up to 80 percent of young offenders meeting the diagnostic criteria for at least one mental health disorder (Lederman et al., 2004(US); McReynolds et al., 2010 (US); Zahn et al., 2010(US)). Evidence from the United States suggests that the prevalence of disorder increases significantly as young people move through the juvenile justice system from intake to remand to custodial sentences (Wasserman et al., 2010). Arnull & Eagle (2009 (UK)) highlight the relationship between self-esteem, alienation and moral disengagement with offending. Females involved with the youth justice system are likely to have deliberately self-harmed and/or contemplated or attempted suicide, and feel oppressed and hopeless about their future (Leve & Chamberlain, 2004 (US); Veysey & Hamilton, 2007 (US)). McReynolds (2010 (US)) suggests that mental health disorders elevate risks for recidivism in young people.

Substance use is common amongst young female offenders, usually alcohol and marijuana. Studies in the US have shown females who offend have substance abuse disorder rates of around 50 percent, with a further 20 percent having two or more co-occurring substance
use disorders (Teplin et al., 2002 (US)). In the UK an association has been reported between the use of alcohol and other drugs with offending and violent behaviour (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). However, research does not consistently show direct correlations between females’ alcohol and drug misuse and offending, and alcohol may be used by some females as a mechanism to deal with emotional problems (CJJI, 2009 (UK); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). Some studies suggest that the relationship between substance use and offending may be stronger for females’ violent offending in particular (Van de Put, 2014 (Netherlands)).

**Risky sexual behaviour and poor physical health**

Studies of females in youth justice systems report high rates of risky sexual behaviour and highlight associations between risky sexual behaviour and offending (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). This risky sexual behaviour includes having unprotected sex, having multiple sexual partners, and being sexually active at a young age. Engaging in risky sexual behaviour increases when accompanied by co-occurring substance use disorders (Leve et al., 2015). It is also linked to higher rates of sexually-transmitted infections in young female offending populations (Odgers et al., 2010 (US)). A smaller set of studies have investigated the physical health outcomes of females who offend. These indicate that females involved in youth justice systems have poor physical health outcomes, such as higher rates of injuries and obesity (Leve et al., 2015). These health problems are most likely linked to living in risky family circumstances, and engaging in injury-risk behaviours, such as alcohol misuse (Odgers et al., 2010).

**Service provision and structural oppression**

Several authors describe the differing pathways to and through youth justice systems that females and males face (Cauffman et al., 2008...
Sharpe (2009) suggests that youth justice systems are unresponsive to females’ life histories and that they often medicalise problems. For example, by prescribing medication in response to trauma exposure such as abuse. Sharpe suggests that there is little acknowledgement of or attempts to deal with wider problems and the specific needs of young women that lie behind their entry into the justice system. As discussed above, females who offend have elevated exposure to trauma and abuse. System and societal responses to female offending, however, reflect gender inequality (Gaarder & Hesselton, 2012; (US) Sherman, 2012(US); Sherman & Balck, 2015(US)). Feminist pathways research discusses the system context as demonstrating ongoing vulnerability of females to abuse by males. It argues that youth justice systems (specifically in the US) are characterised by punitive reactions to females’ coping through criminalising their survival behaviour, in turn limiting their future opportunities. Gaarder and Hesselton (2012(US)) argue that structural oppression is key to understanding females’ offending behaviour, arguing that patriarchy, racism and poverty all shape females’ pathways into offending through early traumatic experiences and ongoing and cumulative victimisation.

Sharpe (2009(UK)) argues that the causes of females’ offending are often individualised and linked to family pathology, with socio-structural risk factors being overlooked. She argues that the needs and characteristics of offending females are highly individualised and that system responses often fail to acknowledge these underlying causes or the ‘baggage’ that offending females carry. Sherman posits that the presence of many females within the US juvenile justice system is fundamentally caused by the child protection system, where females are viewed as ‘difficult clients’ within child protection systems and get moved into youth justice systems
Sherman (2012, p. 1601) explains, “A trauma history is not only a background factor for females in the juvenile justice system, but it can actually drive females into the system. As a result of their trauma histories, females in juvenile justice systems are typically known to the child protection, family services, or mental health system long before they are involved in delinquency. Females in foster placement are more likely to enter the detention system than non-foster females as a result of histories of multiple foster home placements, child protection system policies that penalize females for running away, and inadequate communication across the juvenile justice and child protection systems. All these things contribute to a fragmented personal history and the trauma that stems from consistent disruption.” Sharpe (2009 (UK)) also argues that by failing to meet the welfare needs of females policing practice, sentencing practice, and child welfare service practice ‘suck’ females into the youth justice system. It is also argued that females’ offending behaviour is related to their developmental stage and is closely linked to trauma and abuse, and as such any offending behaviour by females needs to be understood ecologically (Gaarder & Hesselton, 2012(US); Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK); Sherman, 2012(US)). That is, current systems fail to consider the influence of the contexts of family, community and society in females’ offending (Sherman, 2012(US)).

Offering an Aotearoa New Zealand ecological perspective, Swift (2014b (NZ)) considered the influence of background levels of family violence on the violent and anti-social behaviour of the young women she studied. She identified that the young females were raised in environments where violent offending was acceptable and furthermore they were socialised into violence as an accepted behavioural response. Not only did they live with violence and abuse among family members, they were also exposed to hostility and violence within their neighbourhoods and through associations with rival gangs. Female participants in Swift’s research commented on the
normaility of their experiences using phrases such as ‘it’s what you do’, reflecting the effectiveness of their socialisation into the intergenerational transmission of violent behaviour as a normative strategy for managing relationships. These experiences mirror those of Batchelor (2009 (UK)) in a study of Scottish female gang members.

Swift (2014c (NZ)) also presents an ideological explanation for violence by young females. For example, she suggests that this violence can be explained by reference to wider ideologies which position young women against each other in competition for boyfriends. She argues that in this context the behaviours of some females exists on a continuum that may escalate into premeditated physical altercations. Furthermore, she suggests that the impetus for young women to gain a heterosexual relationship privileges males and presents opportunities for exploitation of females and their recruitment into offending activities. In juxtaposition, Swift (2011; 2014a-c (NZ)) suggests that a social ideology shaped by patriarchy encourages a hegemonic masculinity. Witnessing and experiencing violence, exploitation and sexual abuse at the hands of males creates contempt for a traditional gendered script and these females then seek a self-identity associated with machismo stereotypes that bring social status characterised by fighting ‘like a boy’ which provided them with a level of equality with males in their peer group.

In summary, a number of cumulative disadvantages and trauma shapes the onset of female delinquency. Females who are involved in youth justice systems experience a number of emotional, physical, social and behavioural, and health problems understood to operate as risk factors for offending. Females commonly experience problematic family relationships, have exceedingly high rates of childhood trauma and abuse, and have higher rates of mental health disorders, substance use issues, and sexual and physical health problems. For many females, these problems are co-occurring
(Chesney-Lind et al., 2008(US); Smith et al., 2006 (US)). As such, consideration of precipitating risk factors must also acknowledge the co-occurring behaviours that may sustain females’ involvement with delinquent activities such as substance misuse, and health-risking behaviours such as unsafe sexual activity (Chesney-Lind et al., 2008(US); Leve et al., 2015(US); Zahn et al., 2010(US)). There is also a growing call to pay more attention to the social and structural drivers of females’ offending.

While research to date is largely consistent in identifying characteristics and risk factors, each risk factor, while influential, does not in itself provide an explanation for females’ offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). It is not possible to accurately explain how various risk factors and contextual factors may interact together to lead to offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). Risk factors associated with offending may in fact not predict offending, or may produce false positives and thereby suggest more young people will become involved in offending than do (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). It is not clear how far these risk factors are able to predict offending, or the nature of interactions or interrelatedness of them (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)): “It is not yet understood how the relationship between an association with delinquent males and/or delinquent females affects a girl’s own delinquent behaviour ... Much female offending principally takes place with other females ... Thus, while mixing with males appears to be a factor seen to influence onset, the females largely offend on their own, or with other females – raising questions about the impact of mixed gender peer groups on females’ delinquency” (Arnull & Eagle, 2009, p. 22). Another example is early pubertal timing in females, which has been identified as a predictive risk factor (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). However, in a study by Obeidallah et al. (2004(US)), early onset of menstruation was most predictive when a girl was also living in a neighbourhood of high concentrated disadvantage, showing that it is likely to be linked to
wider social and environmental context rather than an isolated factor. In addition, early onset puberty is also associated with sexual and physical abuse, conflict with parents, risky sexual behaviour, and having an older boyfriend (Mendle et al., 2011(US)). It is very difficult for research to fully account for all the factors involved in offending (Fagan & Lindsey, 2014 (US)). Current literature suggests that it is the clustering of a range of factors which interact to increase the likelihood that a young person will engage in offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). Further research is needed to adequately understand and define the exact mechanisms through which the risk factors and offending behaviour interact.

**RISK FACTORS FOR FEMALES AND MALES**

Research findings of what factors increase and decrease the likelihood of youth offending have often been generalisable across gender (Fagan & Lindsey, 2014(US)). There is an obvious and significant difference in the levels of offending of males and females, with males committing a broader range of offences, more frequently, and at a younger age. Early aggressive behaviour is a stronger predictive factor of future violent behaviour and offending for males than females (Tracy et al., 2009 (US)). However, male and female young offenders share many risk factors, including criminal associations, family conflict, having been in state care, and victims of violence or abuse (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Shepard et al., 2013). Females and males both face negative impacts from a lack of parental supervision, abuse and maltreatment, neighbourhood deprivation, familial criminality, low levels of school engagement and educational achievement, and substance misuse (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Day et al., 2015 (US); Gaarder & Hesselton, 2012 (US)).

Some risk factors appear to play a stronger role for young female offenders. For example, Farrington & Painter (2004 (UK)) studied
sisters of a male sample, and concluded that socioeconomic and parental risk factors predicted offending by sisters more strongly, in particular low family income, large family size, parental conviction, low levels of parental supervision, and separation from a parent. While trauma and abuse rates are high for all young offenders, the rate appears elevated for females (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Espinosa & Sorenson, 2016 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Walker et al., 2016 (US); Zahn et al., 2010). Similarly for mental health need and internalising disorders (Gaarder & Hesselton, 2012 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Wasserman et al., 2010 (US); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)), including higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder and low self-esteem (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Espinosa & Sorenson, 2016 (US); Shepard et al., 2013 (Australia); Sherman, 2012 (US); Walker et al., 2016 (US)). In the US, nearly half of offending females meet criteria for a major depressive episode, compared to 14 percent of non-delinquent females, and 12 percent of delinquent males (Abram et al., 2013 (US); Teplin et al., 2012 (US)). One US sample showed that females were much more likely to have attempted suicide; 50 percent compared to seven percent of males (Espinosa & Sorenson 2016 (US)). The relationship between mental health diagnosis and offending appears to be stronger for females than males (Teplin et al., 2002 (US)). Young female offenders are also reported to have higher rates of sexually-transmitted infections than young male offenders, following from more engagement in risky sexual behaviour, and females engaging in survival sex (offering sex for food, shelter, protection, or money) or prostitution (Leve et al., 2015 (US); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). Interestingly, being in a stable romantic relationship may serve as a protective factor against offending for males, but females with problem behaviours are more likely to be in a relationship with male offenders who may initiate offending behaviour (Leve et al., 2015 (US)).

The experience of abuse in relation to offending is gendered (Gaarder
& Hesselton, 2012 (US)). As Schaffner (2006, p. 58) explains, “For males, abuse goes against what they are taught to expect from their position of superiority. Abuse of females confirms their place in a gendered hierarchy.” It should be noted that experiences of physical and/or sexual abuse and victimisation are also risk factors for males; however, females are more likely to report a history of such experiences. For example, in their study of 163 females and 281 males incarcerated in an Ohio youth justice facility, Belknap and Holsinger (2006 (US)) found that abuse victimisation in childhood was a significant risk factor for both males and females, although females were more likely to report experiencing or witnessing abuse (including physical, sexual and verbal abuse). Many of the females in the focus groups in the study reported that their experiences of abuse victimisation had led to their offending (half of the females, compared with two fifths of the males). Other authors report that females tend to have more extreme delinquency outcomes resulting from abuse (Goodkind et al., 2006 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Sherman, 2012 (US)). Physical abuse has been identified as a stronger predictor of violent offending for females than for males (Fitzgerald et al., 2012 (Australia)). Other research suggests that males who have a history of abuse and neglect are not at elevated risk of violent offending (Widom & Maxfield, 2001 (US)).

Witnessing domestic violence appears more strongly related to female than male offending, this is particularly the case in relation
to violent offending (Herrera & McCloskey, 2001 (US); Walker et al., 2016 (US)). Leve et al. (2015 (US)) discuss some preliminary evidence that the effects of parental involvement in crime may have a larger effect on females becoming involved in offending than for males. While Piquero et al. (2005 (US)) found that delinquent peer association was more predictive of offending behaviour for males than females. Van der Put et al. (2014 (Netherlands)) note several female-specific risk factors for recidivism: parents with justice system involvement, alcohol and/or drug abuse by parents, being a victim of abuse, and alcohol or drug abuse by the adolescent herself.

Overall, the literature suggests that there is more similarity than difference in risk factors faced by males and females (Fagan & Lindsey, 2014 (US); van der Put et al., 2014 (Netherlands); Walker et al., 2016). While the risks faced by males and females are largely similar, exposure rates and the magnitude of association can differ by gender (Fagan et al., 2007; Leve et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2016 (US)). Day and colleagues (2015 (US)) explain that while young offenders share many of the same risk factors, they may vary in their sensitivity and level of exposure to certain factors. For example, as already discussed females are more frequently victims of sexual assault and abuse, which tend to start at an earlier age, occur more frequently, and for longer periods of time than for males (Belknap & Holsinger (US), 2006; Gaarder & Hesselton, 2012 (US)). Responses to maltreatment and abuse may also be gendered (Day et al., 2015 (US); Garcia & Lane, 2010 (US)). Males, on the other hand, are exposed to a larger number of risk factors than females (Arnull & Eagle, 2009; Fagan et al., 2007 (US); van der Put et al., 2014 (Netherlands)). Overall there are mixed findings across studies regarding the impact of risk factors on males and females (Fagan & Lindsey, 2014 (US)). In addition, there is limited ability to identify gender differences in causal predictors of offending, particularly...
when studies rely on small samples or use cross-sectional data (Fagan & Lindsey, 2014(US)). The complexity in interactions of risk factors is apparent and gender patterns are described by researchers as indicative, not definitive. In no case is a risk factor for one gender a protective factor for the other gender (Leve et al., 2015(US)).

PROGRAMMES THAT ADDRESS FEMALE OFFENDING AND JUSTICE SYSTEM ISSUES

There is ongoing debate regarding whether specific, targeted programmes should be developed with females, or whether females’ risks and needs are not significantly dissimilar to males who offend and therefore that their needs can be accommodated within existing programmes (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (US); Sharpe, 2009 (UK)). As young male offenders greatly outnumber females, existing systems, policies and practices have been developed primarily in response to males. Some argue that as a result these systems do not take into account, or adequately address, the unique developmental, social and psychological needs of females (Bloom & Covington, 2001 (US); Bloom et al., 2002 (US); Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004 (US); Garcia & Lane, 2010, 2013 (US); Hodge et al., 2015 (US); Le, 2012 (UK); Walker et al., 2016 (US); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). While females are increasingly entering youth justice systems, Garcia and Lane (2013 (US)) argue that little change has been made in system responses. The growing number of females within youth justice systems has significant implications for system design and service provision (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). While there is much debate about what effective responses in youth justice settings that take into account the risks

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1 NOTE: There is little research evidence regarding the effectiveness of programmes for offending females, and existing literature is largely US-based. It is noted that the US juvenile justice system or the UK system are not directly comparable to Aotearoa New Zealand and may not reflect the experiences of females in Aotearoa New Zealand, although this research base has been influential in system development and reform, and in the development of programming internationally.
and needs of youth justice females might be there are few studies which evaluate programme effectiveness in helping females desist from offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). As females represent a small proportion of youth offending populations, they have often been excluded from large-scale youth justice studies (Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)). The small numbers of young female offenders has resulted in both a lack of specialised policy and programming and a literature which is not able to provide a clear picture about what works specifically for females (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)).

This section provides an overview of literature which looks at best practice for work with justice-involved females. Overall, the literature suggests that to effectively respond, interventions should both target risk factors, and take into account co-occurring behaviour (Fagan et al., 2007 (US)). In addition, interventions must be sensitive to gender differences, particularly in relation to trauma and abuse (Walker et al., 2016 (US)). Sherman and Balck (2015, p. 4) explain:

“*These females very often have histories of trauma, conflict, and deprivation and need social supports, but many of the traditional tools of juvenile justice systems are ill-suited to support healthy environments for females and provide for their social welfare. They are blunt instruments—formal petitions, court proceedings, detention, and findings of rules violations—rather than individualized approaches, consistent with developmental research and tailored to each girl’s social environment, risk level, and needs. As a result, even the most well-intentioned juvenile justice systems tend to push females further into the system, with arrest leading to petitioning, leading to detention, leading to incarceration, etc. - all the while underutilising opportunities to reduce system involvement. The goal of helping females causes courts and systems to*
Outcomes for females within youth justice systems are likely to be better when needs and risks are assessed accurately, and the right support is provided to meet the specific needs of females (CJJI, 2014 (UK)). For these reasons several authors advocate for a developmental approach in responding to females’ offending, focusing more on supporting females, rather than on punishment (Sherman & Black, 2015 (US); Walker et al., 2016 (US)). Sherman and Balck’s (2015 (US)) argument for a developmental approach stems from three factors that characterise female offending: that females exhibit challenging behaviour which is largely connected to trauma and abuse; that system responses are blunt, and; that once females enter current systems, there is little response to their needs and rather a tendency to focus on deficits. “In order to produce better outcomes for females, systems must craft reforms that directly address the root causes of their behaviour and provide an alternate, non-justice-system path for females’ healthy development and healing” (Sherman & Balck, 2015, p. 19).

This section considers literature regarding the need for services that address both vulnerability and offending; strength-based, coordinated and preventive practice; community-based programmes and diversion; consideration of gender at all levels of the system; utilisation of evidence-based practices; and supporting transitions to adulthood.

Responses that address both vulnerability and offending

Research over many decades has documented a complex interplay between offending and vulnerability. Many youth justice females have complex histories; they are highly vulnerable, with many welfare, care and protection needs. Action to protect and reduce risk
for females has been identified as a priority, however it can be difficult to ascertain exactly which needs of females are criminogenic and which other significant needs are not directly related to their offending (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). For example, offending behaviour increases the vulnerability of some females’ (for example, to drug use), while for other females their vulnerability (for example, homelessness) contributes to their offending (CJJI, 2014 (US)). Their full range of needs must be addressed to successfully lessen propensity to commit crime (Harper & Chitty, 2005 (UK)), this means that youth justice systems need to be able to recognise and respond to past victimisation and abuse, as well as mental, physical and sexual health issues, and substance use disorders (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); CJJI, 2014 (UK)). The US literature points to evidence that females are often penalised for normal, disorderly teenage behaviour or expected behavioural issues stemming from trauma. Through addressing all factors relating to offending, systems can respond to disruptive behaviours not in a wholly punitive way. Espinosa and Sorenson state, “A trauma-informed juvenile justice system would include judges, juvenile corrections staff, and juvenile probation officers who are knowledgeable of the impact of trauma and have the skills and resources to appropriately respond to the associated behaviours” (2016, p. 200). However, given that the causal links between females’ risk factors and offending behaviour are not clearly understood, it can be difficult in practice to address all of these needs (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Vitopoulos et al., 2012 (Canada)). There needs to be

“**The juvenile justice system is animated by two competing goals that are in tension in the cases of girls – social welfare and social control – and that tension in part explains why systems struggle to respond to and meet girls’ needs**” (Sherman & Balck, 2015, p. 4)
balance in the core mandates of a youth justice system: holding young offenders accountable for their offending behaviour, protecting public safety and responding to the needs of young offenders.

Best (2013 (NZ)) provides a clear distinction between a ‘welfare-based’ youth justice system, and a ‘justice-based’ system. Firstly, a system based on welfare focuses on the individual circumstances of the young person, and the vulnerability and unmet need that preceded offending behaviour (Best, 2013 (NZ)). A concern is that females may become criminalised because of welfare concerns (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK)). Sharpe and Gelsthorpe (2009) state that females are often misclassified as high risk as a result of these significant welfare needs, and tend to be “pushed up the sentencing ladder more quickly, and for more trivial offences, than males” (p. 200). A welfare-based model would direct action towards these underlying issues in order to reduce or stop offending behaviour. On the other hand, a justice-based system would focus on the offences committed, and seek accountability through punishment. This model aims to both protect the wider community from the young person, and to deter reoffending. The young person is viewed as autonomous and independent. While the needs of the young person are not ignored, they are believed to be best dealt with in other contexts (such as schools and within families). Best (2013 (NZ)) contends that there are advantages to both approaches, and that it is important to both consider females’ personal circumstances and pathways into offending (including physical and sexual abuse, dysfunctional family situations, and mental health issues) as well as giving a fair outcome through recognising their autonomy and agency. While New Zealand’s Child, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989 includes objectives to ensure that young people are held accountable and encouraged to accept responsibility, this youth justice legislation also states that young people’s needs must be acknowledged and causes of offending
addressed. Best (2013 (NZ)) argues that while there is a mandatory consideration of a young person’s needs, this is inexplicit and does not guarantee that any gender-specific needs will be addressed.

**Community-based programmes and diversion**

Youth justice systems need to protect the public, reduce reoffending, as well as keep females safe. As already noted, critics have argued that within a system designed for male populations, females, given their greater vulnerability, are more likely to be categorised as ‘high need’ (Covington & Bloom, 2006 (US)). However, high need does not necessarily always imply ‘high risk’; females often present a lower risk to society given their lower rates of offending and less serious offending (Covington & Bloom, 2006 (US); Hubbard & Matthews, 2008 (US)). Holtfreter and Morash (2003 (US)) assert that inappropriately assessing females as high risk increases the chances of them receiving strict sanctions that could exacerbate the issues precipitating the onset of their offending (such as depression and disruptions in relationships). Taking this into account, early intervention, preventing abuse and building resilience may help to limit levels of offending for females (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006 (US); CJJI, 2014 (UK); Sharpe, 2009 (UK); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)). Leve et al. (2015 (US)) identify two areas where preventive work needs to focus for females: services in child welfare and services in schools. More effective child welfare interventions are required to prevent abuse and improve placement stability, and work to minimise risk of entering youth justice systems. Identifying and responding in a school setting to risk factors, such as truancy, lack of a sense of belonging at school and child welfare involvement, will help to improve engagement in school as a protective factor for at-risk females (Leve et al., 2015 (US)).

Research shows increased risk of poor long-term outcomes for young
people in secure facilities, including a high likelihood of re-offending post-release and eventual entry into the adult criminal justice system (Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)). “Secure facilities harm females by re-traumatising them and are not effective at addressing the issues underlying females’ behaviour or providing positive supports to females in need” (Sherman & Balck, 2015, p. 56). Young offenders in confinement are more likely to have backgrounds of abuse, loss, and family violence and may externalise through aggressive behaviour (Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)). Some authors hypothesise that traumatic stress symptoms can be heightened or compounded within a secure youth justice environment (Espinosa & Sorenson, 2016 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Mahoney et al., 2004 (US)). While existing research does not account for gender differences in detention experiences within custodial youth justice institutions, Espinosa and Sorenson (2016 (US)) found in the US that, given high rates of trauma in female offender populations, females were particularly vulnerable to re-traumatisation through confinement, and this led in turn to further sanctions and longer juvenile justice system involvement because challenging behaviours and delinquency escalated. Practices within youth justice facilities, such as seclusion and restraints (Huckshorn, 2006 (US)), loss of privacy, and being observed or restrained by male staff, can retraumatisise female victims.”

“What is certain is that when girls do offend, the rate at which they are being processed through the criminal justice system has increased dramatically over a very short period. Minor youthful transgressions, which make up the majority of young females’ offences, are being formally policed at an unprecedented rate” (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009, p. 196).
of abuse (Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)).

The use of alternative diversional processes in youth justice systems has been reported to be effective for young female offenders, particularly those living in traumatic social contexts (Field, 2004 (Australia); Lynch, 2014 (NZ); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (UK)). The use of diversionary mechanisms is suggested as more appropriate for females, with the potential to keep them out of the criminal justice system long-term. For example, participating in mental health diversion programmes for young people with substance use disorders lowers recidivism rates (McReynolds et al., 2010 (US)). Diversion and alternative interventions are identified as more appropriate for “females who are generally pro-social but have experienced an abrupt onset of misbehaviour in response to external factors (such as bereavement)” (Arnull & Eagle, 2009, p. 37). Community-based interventions are effective as they take place in real-world contexts and therefore are more able to directly address underlying drivers of young female offending (Leve et al., 2015 (US); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)). Community based responses are appropriate where public safety is not a concern (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). Where females are already in secure placements, they should have access to medical and mental health services and resources, assessment and plans which are gender-focused and address their particular needs (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)).

**Addressing gender issues at a system level**

Several authors (for example, Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)) argue that juvenile justice systems have traditionally ignored the role of a gendered society and the importance of gender in offending. Garcia and Lane (2013 (US)) argue that youth justice systems appear gender-neutral, but have been developed for young males offenders, and must build capacity and appropriate responses to females (Garcia &
Lane, 2013 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US)). Best (2013 (NZ)) argues that national and international instruments should include explicit reference to gender and provisions for females, in order to recognise their special needs – to “go beyond mere reference to recognising ‘needs’ of offenders ... to ensure that the special needs of these females are catered for” (Best, 2013, p. 8).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, outside of Swift’s (2011, 2014a-c (NZ)) research on female violence, there is a lack of gender-specific research that investigates the profiles and backgrounds of young female offenders and there is limited understanding of females and their offending behaviour. There is no gender differentiation within the youth justice system at either a policy or legislative level (Best, 2013 (NZ); Lynch, 2014 (NZ)). For example, the Child, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989 uses the single category of ‘young person’ implying that there are no significant differences between males and females and assuming that the same system can work effectively for both genders (Best, 2013 (NZ)). Additionally, the New Zealand government’s 2013-2023 Youth Crime Action Plan lacks reference to gender and specifically young female offenders. Lynch (2014 (NZ)) also notes a lack of female-specific rehabilitative and reintegrative programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand. This is concerning because not only does this mean the system tends not to differentiate on gender, but furthermore it is not able to respond to

“The criminal justice system is a difficult place for young women to find themselves. Clearly still in a minority, traditional systems of court processing and detention have failed to deal with the social and gender issues that contextualise their presence in the system”

(Field, 2004, p. 2)
any heterogeneity in the young female offending population. For example, there is no literature concerning any specific issues that may be present for young Māori females. There has also been international criticism of New Zealand’s practice of holding young female offenders alongside adult prisoners and of not having separate provisions to those designed for males (Best, 2013 (NZ); Stanley, 2011 (NZ)). Best (2013 (NZ)) highlights the need for New Zealand to ensure that appropriate residential facilities are available for females.

“While there is little evidence that the resultant criminalization of girls has been intentioned, in a gender-specific way, it does appear that misplaced attempts to further equal opportunities through equal (that is, identical) treatment, combined with girls’ and young women’s minority (and thus marginalized) status within the youth justice system, have led to gender being ignored in both policy and practice, the consequences of which have served to criminalize girls and propel them into custody” (Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009, p. 197)

Case study: Girls’ Courts in the United States

Recently, the United States has developed gender-specific court services for females charged with crimes. Several states have their own formal girls’ courts which aim to address gender issues for young female offenders, particularly underlying problems which have led to the offending such as any traumatic life events (Harrison, 2012 (US)). The Hawaii Girls’ Court has all female staff, and focuses exclusively on female offenders (Davidson et al., 2011 (US)). This Court provides a range of strength-based responses, sanctions and accountability, immediate service access and clinical intervention (Harrison, 2012
The females attend open court hearings every five weeks for a year where they appear with their parents in front of the same judge to share their experiences, strengths and achievements and challenges (Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)). In addition to Court sittings, females’ groups and parents’ groups provide sessions and activities that support the resolution of issues such as family violence, trauma, sexual abuse, and substance abuse issues, and the development of healthy relationships, parenting skills, and conflict resolution skills (Davidson et al., 2011 (US)). Parents are required to actively participate in the Court and its programmes, in order to develop stability and sustainable progress and to improve relationships within females’ families (Davidson et al., 2011 (US)). Girls’ Court provides direct links to mental health services through a Girls’ Court therapist. Court staff also coordinate access to other services. The females must engage in education and community service activities. A 2011 evaluation of the Hawaii Girls’ Court (Davidson et al., 2011 (US)) found that engaging in Girls’ Court provided more positive outcomes for females, based on statistical data, interviews and focus groups. They reported that overall recidivism was reduced (compared to a comparison group) including a marked decrease in detentions and absconding, less drug use, improved academic achievement, and awareness of healthy relationships and improved family relationships. The females’ risk factors were mediated by participation in programmes by the females and their families: “The focused attention on issues of relevance to the females, the introduction of staff who are educated in females’ gendered lives and who appreciate that females are “too good to lose,” the availability of services and opportunities for the participants and their parents, and the treatment of girls’ delinquency not as a consequence of girls’ poor moral character but rather as a reaction and coping strategy to other issues and problems in their lives all appear to be important aspects of the Court’s success” (Davidson et al., 2011, p. 324).
Programmes that have been evaluated

There is need for high quality interventions for females who offend. However, there is limited evidence of how interventions should be structured and what key characteristics are needed to best meet the needs of offending females (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Hipwell & Loeber, 2006 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (US)). As females comprise a small proportion of the population of young people in youth justice systems, even when analyses do include gender, it can be difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). Evaluations of gender-non-specific programmes rarely include gender analyses (Hubbard & Matthews, 2008(US); Zahn et al., 2009(US)). This section reviews the evidence for gender-specific programming, gender-specific risk assessments, females and restorative justice, key components of effective programmes for females, and the importance of multidimensional practice.

Gender-specific programmes
The CJJI (2014 (UK) describes a continuum of strategies for working with females: “From a position where very little distinction is made between males and females (gender-neutral), to a practice framework that makes adaptations to services designed primarily for males to accommodate the needs of females (gender-sensitive), to one that provides a range of services solely for females (gender-specific)” (p. 17). A review of Youth Offending Teams in the UK found that the strategies employed did not always appear to be based on clear empirical evidence, rather youth justice practice had developed over time and was driven by staffing and the availability of resources (CJJI, 2014 (UK)).

Gender-specific programming utilises “a comprehensive approach to female delinquency rooted in the experience of females … It bridges theory into practice by combining female adolescent theory with
juvenile justice practices” (Greene et al., 1998 cited in Garcia & Lane, 2013 (US)). Gender-specific programmes are built upon the theory that young people’s pathways into crime and through youth justice systems are gendered, and that females are affected by different risk factors to males (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Hubbard & Matthews, 2008 (US); Vitopoulos et al., 2012 (Canada)). The fundamental belief of proponents of gender-specific programming is that males and females differ developmentally (Chesney-Lind et al., 2008 (US); Day et al., 2015 (US); Hubbard & Matthews, 2008 (US)). Gender-specific programming has developed in response to the recognition of the gendered nature of risk factors for females and males in delinquency and offending. While females and males share a significant number of risk factors for involvement in delinquent and offending behaviour, cognitive and emotional responses to these risk factors differ between the genders, and some risk factors have a stronger impact for females than they do for males (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Day et al., 2015 (US)). This represents a shift beyond a pure risk reduction framework, towards enhancement of female offenders’ emotional well-being and capabilities to improve their quality of life.

Proponents of gender-specific programming for females highlight the importance of relationships in females’ lives, and maintain that programmes should address social and emotional risks as well as physical risks, for example through providing a safe physical space where therapists can assist females with healing and support them to develop adaptive strategies (Robinson & Ryder, 2014 (US); Weir, 2015 (NZ)). Arnull and Eagle (2009 (UK)) identified indicators of need for gender-specific services:

1. Females are at increased risk of offending when they have pro-criminal associations or have close relationships with offending males.
2. Youth justice practitioners report difficulties in working
with mixed gender groups.

3. Many young offenders share the same risk factors and needs, so programme content aimed at reducing offending may be similar. However, it is indicated that delivery may be best in different ways to males and females (Lanctot et al., 2012 (Canada)).

There is, however, ongoing debate about whether gender-specific intervention models are required, given that many of the core set of offending risk factors are experienced by both males and females. The little research evidence of gender-specific research is predominantly US-based, and may not be particularly comparable for example, given high proportions of status offences in the US (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)).

The evaluation evidence for the effectiveness of gender-specific programming for females in the justice system is mixed (Development Services Group Inc., 2010 (US); Hubbard & Matthews, 2008 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (US)). Several reviews of gender-specific programming in America have indicated that there is still limited knowledge and understanding of what works for females who are involved in the youth justice system. Indeed, Chesney-Lind and colleagues (2008 (US)) reviewed eight female-specific programmes and concluded that “knowledge of what works for females has been little advanced from when Lipsey (1992) examined the literature and showed minimal relevant evaluation research” (p. 178).

Day, Zahn and Tichavsky (2015 (US)) investigated the effectiveness of gender-responsive programming for males and females in secure detention. Through undertaking an event-history analysis with 148 females and 140 males released from gender-responsive and traditional detention facilities in Connecticut, they found that, in comparison to traditional programming, gender-specific
programming for youth in secure detention was associated with a lower risk of recidivism for females who had gender-sensitive risk factors (for example, histories of trauma, higher levels of depression/anxiety, anger/irritability, and alcohol and drug use). However, for females who did not have a history of trauma, were not depressed or angry, and who did not have high levels of physical and mental health needs (including substance misuse), gender-specific programming was associated with a higher risk of reoffending. No significant differences in rates of recidivism were noted for the males in the study, whether or not they displayed risk factors commonly associated with males’ delinquency (Day et al., 2015 (US)). This suggests that gender-responsive programming may be effective for females who display gender-sensitive risk factors (such as histories of trauma, and increased mental health needs), but is likely to be less effective in reducing delinquency for females who do not have these risk factors. It also highlights the importance of matching service provision to the risks and needs of young people.

It is noteworthy that gender-specific programme evaluations have indicated potential positive effects on outcomes other than recidivism, for example education, employment, relationships with family and friends, and on psychosocial outcomes such as self-esteem and self-efficacy. These factors are known to be negatively associated with delinquency which is a major driver of offending (see for example; Cooney et al., 2008 (US); Gilligan et al., 1991 (US); Hubbard & Pratt, 2002 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (US)). One example of a gender-specific programme that has shown these positive outcomes is the AMICUS Girls’ Restorative Programme (Gordon, 2004 (US)). The AMICUS Girls’ Restorative Programme used restorative justice circles and trauma counselling to support females who were serious and chronic offenders (Gordon, 2004 (US)). The evaluation of the programme found that females who participated in the programme reported increased self-awareness, advocacy, optimism and
motivation; a better understanding of the impacts of their actions on others, and an increased sense of compassion, caring behaviour and remorse towards others. Additionally, the females reported improved relationships with their families, probation officers and peers, and decreased levels of destructive behaviours towards others (Gordon, 2004 (US)).

A second programme that has been found to be effective in reducing risk factors and promoting protective factors for females in the youth justice system is WINGS (Working to Insure and Nurture Girls’ Success; Burke et al., 2003 (US)). WINGS aimed to reduce the number of females entering and continuing in the youth justice system by ensuring they and their families were able to access and receive appropriate services (Burke et al., 2003, p.23). WINGS provided home visitation, individualised case plans addressing the needs of the females and their families, community-based and centre-based activities including mother-daughter mediation and programmes to address identified needs (i.e. education, vocational training, substance use, and anger management). The evaluation of WINGS involved 171 females who had completed the WINGS programme and a comparison group of 399 females. Females were randomly assigned to receive the WINGS programme or traditional probation services. Data for the evaluation was gathered from a variety of sources (including observation, reports from service providers, and self-reports from the females) at entry into the programme, and at 6-, 12-, and 18-month follow-up. Protective factors were measured at programme entry and exit. Females who completed the WINGS programme had more protective factors at programme exit than those in the comparison group. The biggest changes for WINGS females were in self-control, pro-social adult relationships, peer pressure management, and organisational involvement. WINGS females also had few risk factors at programme exit (e.g. truancy, delinquent friends, drug use and social isolation).
However, there appeared to be no significant differences between the WINGS females and comparison group females with regards to reoffending after completing the programme. Recidivism results were mixed: WINGS females appeared to reoffend at lower rates at 6 months post-completion (WINGS: 4%; comparison: 6%); at 12 and 18 months post completion, it appeared that WINGS females had higher rates of recidivism than comparison group females (WINGS: 15% and 18%; comparison: 11% and 15%). As Zahn et al. (2009 (US)) note, no significance tests were reported; therefore, it can only be concluded that females in the WINGS programme did no better than those in the comparison group with regards to recidivism. School success was a third outcome Burke and colleagues (2003 (US)) measured. School success included measures of enrolment, attendance, suspensions/expulsions, and grades. During the intervention, WINGS females were significantly more likely to attend school on a regular basis (WINGS: 70%; comparison: 45%); however, there were no significant differences in attendance at the 6-month follow-up. During programme intervention, fewer WINGS females received failing grades (WINGS: 18%; comparison: 30%). However, there were no significant differences between the WINGS and comparison group females with regards to school grades at the 6-month follow-up, suggesting that the effects of the programme were not sustained.

Zahn et al. (2009 (US)) found that gender-specific programmes appeared to be effective in improving females’ school success (for example, their attendance, rate of suspension/expulsion, and school grades) at least while the females were actively engaged in the programmes. However, there were few long-term effects on school success. For example, the RYSE (Reaffirming Young Sisters’ Excellence) programme evaluation found that at the time of programme entry, 61% of females had school attendance problems, 55% were performing below grade level, and 36% had been expelled or suspended within the previous year (National Council on Crime and
Delinquency, 2001 (US)). Although it was expected that RYSE females would show greater improvement in their educational engagement and success than females in the comparison group, there were no significant differences between the groups. The females in the comparison group showed significantly greater improvement for educational problems than the treatment group. These unexpected findings were attributed to interviewer effects, including missing data (National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2001 (US)).

The overall lack of evaluation evidence makes it difficult to determine the aspects of youth justice programmes that result in better outcomes for females and reducing rates of subsequent offending, gender-specific or not (Day et al., 2015 (US); Fagan & Lindsey, 2014 (US) Zahn et al., 2009 (US)). For example, Fagan & Lindsey (2014 (US)) in a review of evidence-based preventive community programmes found differing effects for male and female youth participants; some of the interventions were more effective in addressing females’ substance use, delinquency and/or violent behaviour than those for males, whereas other programmes resulted in more positive outcomes for males. They concluded that there is no clear pattern of which programmes were more effective for females or males considering programme type, length, or characteristics of participants (Fagan & Lindsey, 2014 (US)). In addition, they identified iatrogenic effects from some programmes, that is, some reviewed programmes caused harm to one or the other gender.

**Gendered risk assessment**

Risk assessment tools assess the risk of outcomes (such as reoffending) and take into account offending nature and history, education, mental health and substance abuse (Brumbaugh et al., 2010 (US)). There is an increasing amount of research investigating a gendered approach to assessing risk of reoffending in youth offending populations, with the aim of ensuring appropriate
responses to young female offenders through the development of suitable risk management plans and interventions (Shepard et al., 2013 (Australia); Vitopoulos et al., 2012 (Canada)). Currently, as females make up a small proportion of young offenders, they are assessed using generic risk assessment instruments, which do not necessarily account for specific risk factors for females (van der Put et al., 2014 (Netherlands); Vitopoulos et al., 2012 (Canada)). Given the growing recognition that risk factors may influence females’ and males’ offending behaviour in different ways, there is concern that existing risk assessments for young offenders may not be appropriate for use in young female populations nor accurate in predicting recidivism (van der Put et al., 2014 (Netherlands)). It has been recommended that assessment tools validated specifically with female populations be used. The CJJI (2014) found that UK youth offending teams’ best practice was characterised by assessment and intervention that recognised differences between females’ and males’ needs. However, the approach of accounting for gender differences was not consistently applied. Nearly 50 percent of assessments of vulnerability lacked sufficient detail “with many failing to recognise the reality of day-to-day life for the girls, including the impact of relationships, alcohol and emotional and mental health issues” (CJJI, 2014, p. 8). This was in part shaped by the lack of an informed perspective; it was difficult to determine the exact nature and level of vulnerability without effective partnerships and information sharing with other agencies and the females themselves (CJJI, 2014 (UK)). The CJJI (2014) found that this resulted in unclear plans being developed that were not adequately outcomes-focused or based closely on identified needs.

**Restorative justice and females**

In restorative justice practice, the focus moves away from retribution to restoration through mechanisms such as family group conferences, mediation, and circles (Morris & Maxwell, 2001 (NZ)). Some research
advocates the use of restorative justice practice with girl offenders, positing that it aligns well with the needs of females and that females may benefit more than males (Gaarder & Hesselton 2012 (US)). Restorative justice approaches are consistent with the level of harm presented by female offenders and the need to target their offending pathways (Bloom et al., 2003 (US)): “Women offenders are good candidates for restorative justice and community corrections. Because they commit far fewer serious or violent offences and pose less risk to public safety than male offenders, they are in a preferred position to take the lead in participating in programs of restorative justice” (p. xxxi). Females in custody may have regret and shame and restorative processes can provide wanted opportunities for females to express feelings and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes (Gaarder & Belknap, 2006 (US)). It has been found that participation in alternative, informal restorative justice processes can result in greater reduction in reoffending rates for females compared to males long-term (Best, 2013 (NZ); Field, 2004 (Australia)).

Other research evidence however, suggests that restorative processes, in particular family group conferences, may not effectively cater to the needs of offending females (Best, 2013 (NZ)). In a study of family group conferences in Aotearoa New Zealand, females felt less positive about family group conferences, and were more likely to be described as less compliant and more likely to challenge the conference process than males (Maxwell, et al., 2004 (NZ)). Other Aotearoa New Zealand research (Swift, 2011 (NZ)) found that young women who had participated in school based disciplinary actions, involving mediation or restorative processes, did so without sincerity. Many described simply going through the motions to meet requirements and that the activity did little to resolve existing tensions.

Daly (2008 (Australia)) reported a similar finding in relation to South
Australian juvenile justice conferences, but explained differences between males and females by the nature of their offences. In addition, females in particular may face gendered practical and process disadvantages in conferencing, which may adversely affect their participation and outcomes (Field, 2004 (Australia)). For example, Maxwell et al. (2004 (NZ)) found females were less likely to feel that they could express their views as they felt intimidated, were less likely than males to report being fairly treated, less likely to feel that they could put their offending behind them, and only half as likely as males to report that the family group conference process had mitigated against reoffending. Several authors highlight the risk of conferencing perpetuating gendered power imbalances, and reinforcing subordination of females within families and communities (Best, 2013 (NZ); Field, 2004 (Australia); Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK)). For example, within the private environment of a family group conference, there is neither public accountability nor an appeal process (Field, 2004 (Australia)). In contrast to research promoting conferencing as opportunities to address shame and regret, some research shows that conferencing processes may be harmful to females’ internal processing and feelings of guilt, self-blame and self-harm (Field, 2004 (Australia); Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK)).

Key components of effective interventions for females

Comprehensive programmes, targeting known multiple risk factors and protective factors, alongside an individualised approach and including females’ families, may be most effective in supporting positive outcomes for females in the youth justice system (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). Numerous authors (see for example, Chesney-Lind et al., 2008 (US); Day et al., 2015 (US); Matthews & Hubbard, 2008 (US); Swift, 2011 (NZ); Vesey & Hamilton, 2007; Zahn et al., 2009)
suggest that it is important that programmes provided to females in the youth justice system meet their physical, emotional and relational needs, and provide alternatives to the ‘help’ they already receive through their social networks, such as through gangs or family relationships. This ‘help’ is likely to amplify the risks that they face, for example by encouraging them to participate in crimes or exposing them to abuse. However, simply teaching a girl who is surviving through prostitution about sexual health and abstinence will not be effective; programmes need to provide her with a safe place to live, and options for earning an income (Chesney-Lind et al., 2008). Another important element that was noted by various authors (see for example, Chesney-Lind et al., 2008; Vesey & Hamilton, 200 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (US)) was a lack of comprehensive, wraparound services that continued once the females returned to their communities. Chesney-Lind and colleagues (2008 (US)) noted that a continuum of care addressing the on-going mental health (including substance misuse), physical health, educational, housing and other needs of females was largely missing from the programmes they evaluated. 

“It has been argued that the needs of women who offend appear ‘multiple and interconnected’. It is this apparent difficulty in disentangling the interconnections which have led for calls for girls and women’s offending behaviour programmes to be ‘holistic’. Certainly ... the evidence for risk factors for the onset and persistency of offending in girls suggest that they involve multiple social, environmental, biological and personality factors, and that it is the clustering of factors which appears most predictive, along with the absence of significant protective factors”  
(Arnell & Eagle, 2009, p. 35).
Targeting known risk and protective factors is an important aspect of providing effective rehabilitation programmes for females in the youth justice system. One example of a programme which addresses this is Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC). MTFC utilises behavioural management approaches within a foster care setting. Each female has an individualised care plan, in addition to standardised components including fidelity monitoring to ensure that foster parents implement behaviour management strategies correctly, foster parent group training and support meetings, individual therapy to target females’ specific needs, family therapy targeted at improving parental management strategies, and monitoring of school engagement and progress (Chamberlain et al., 2007 (US)). Evaluations of MTFC have demonstrated effects that are similar for females and males, for example reducing arrests for status, property, person-to-person, and drug offences (Chamberlain & Reid, 1994 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (US)). Additionally, in a two-year follow-up of a randomised study with delinquent females, Chamberlain and colleagues (200(US)) found that MTFC was associated with lower levels of self-reported delinquency, fewer days spent in secure facilities and fewer criminal referrals when compared with traditional programming. Furthermore, Treatment Foster Care Oregon for Females (TFCO; a MTFC programme adapted and enhanced to meet the needs of females) included programme features such as: sanctions and reinforcement to help females cope with, and avoid, social and relational aggression; support for females to develop and practice strategies for emotional regulation (such as early recognition of distress, and coping mechanisms); support to develop peer relationship-building skills; strategies to help avoid and manage sexually risky and coercive situations; as well as teaching about the personal risks of drug use (Smith et al., 2012 (US)). The outcomes of a number of follow-up studies of females who participated in the TFCO programme were superior to females who were randomly assigned to receive traditional group care. For
example, females who participated in TFCO had lower rates of recidivism, lower rates of pregnancy, increased school engagement, lower levels of drug use, and lower levels of depressive and psychotic symptoms (Leve et al., 2015, p. 268).

The importance of delivering comprehensive programmes that target multiple risk factors is also noted by various authors. For example, intensive in-home service programmes provide services addressing multiple risk factors to the young person and their family within their own home or community. Services are targeted at factors the young person and their family identify as priorities, and may include addressing mental health issues, substance misuse, problematic behaviour, and difficult family dynamics. Service providers have low caseloads, and are available to the family at any time for crisis management (Bright et al., 2014 (US)). In an evaluation of the gender differences in outcomes following intensive in-home services for justice involved youth, Bright, Hurley and Barth (2014 (US)) found that females had lower rates of recidivism than males at 12-months post-discharge. Bright and colleagues (2014 (US)) suggest that the lower rates of recidivism for females when compared with males in their sample may be due to the individualised nature of the intensive in-home service programme and the focus on family and mental health needs. Problems associated with mental health and family relationships were noted more frequently by females in their sample.

Given that females’ needs are often complex and interconnected, programmes which address their delinquency and offending need to respond to these multiple needs. For example, experiences of trauma, abuse and/or neglect can lead to females running away from home. In turn, this leads to them spending increased amounts of time on the streets, and using risky strategies (such as prostitution or selling drugs to obtain money, or exchanging sex for shelter or food)
in order to survive (Chesney-Lind et al., 2008 (US)). This risk amplification highlights the importance of targeting multiple risk factors in programmes that address females’ offending. Robinson and Ryder (2014, p.198) note that “treatment needs to do more than instil coping mechanisms to be effective” for females who are involved with the youth justice system.

Gaarder and Hesselton (2012 (US)) state that while the presence of elevated levels of sexual and physical abuse among females is documented, youth justice and welfare services remain largely unresponsive to this, with many females unable to access treatment for mental health problems or substance abuse issues. In the UK, a report by CJJI (2014) highlighted that responses to females who were victims of sexual abuse were of varying quality and effectiveness, and that multi-agency action concentrated more on information sharing, rather than targeting interventions to reduce risk to females.

In addition, while there has been some research on gender-specific programming, researchers have been unable to detail significant effects (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). They do, however, also highlight some key areas for inclusion (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). A dual focus on offending behaviour and risk factors is emphasised (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Harper & Chitty, 2005 (UK)). Content that should be included in programme design:

- Targeting co-occurring substance misuse
- Safe physical and emotional environment and emphasis on building relationships with staff
- Focus on reasons for the offending behaviour, such as neglect and abuse and victimisation
- Building trust and healthy interpersonal relationships
- Focus on positive engagement in education, training and employment, reducing socioeconomic risk
- Parenting and skill-building
- Focus on strengths, separating the behaviour and the person
- Coordinating a broad range of services
- Mental health problems
- Matched to individual needs of females
- Challenge anti-social behaviour, attitudes and relationships

(Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK); Bloom et al., 2003 (US); CJJI, 2014 (UK); Fagan & Lindsey, 2014 (US); Garcia & Lane, 2013 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)).

Some research has linked an individualised focus, where intervention is matched to individual need and risk factors, to improved outcomes (Walker et al., 2016 (US)). Such practice recognises the heterogeneity of female youth justice populations by providing differentiated services (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK) CJJI, 2014 (UK); Sharpe & Gelsthorpe, 2009 (UK); van der Put et al., 2014 (Netherlands)). It is known that effective interventions make “an explicit link between offending, criminogenic needs and inputs designed to meet those needs” (Arnull & Eagle, 2009, p. 90). Resourcing and practice needs to be based on a sound understanding of the needs of females and the rates, background, characteristics and nature of their offending behaviour (CJJI, 2014 (UK)).

Various authors highlight the importance of involving family in interventions for females who offend (see for example, Cooney et al., 2008 (US); Garcia & Lane, 2010 (US); Hipwell & Loeber, 2006 (US); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (US)). Family plays a key role in determining levels of female delinquency, acting as both a risk factor and a protective factor. Working with a females’ family also acknowledges the
importance of social and contextual factors in shaping their developmental and offending trajectories (Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)). As the family context has been identified as a core risk and protective factor for females, it follows that effective interventions are based within the family-context: “To achieve positive outcomes, work with the adults in the girl’s life” (Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)).

Family-based interventions which strengthen family relationships and functioning alongside strengthening females’ individual capabilities may be effective (Leve et al., 2015 (US)). An example of this is seen in Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST), a family therapy approach based upon Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social ecological theory. Treatment is family-inclusive, action-oriented and time-limited, and addresses intrapersonal (for example, cognitive) and systemic (for example, family, peer and school) factors that are known correlates of delinquency in young people. Furthermore, MST is provided “with an overriding goal of empowering parents with the skills and resources needed to independently address the inevitable difficulties that arise

“Girls’ family relationships are central to their healthy development and engaging families in solutions throughout the juvenile justice process is critical. The fact that many girls’ families are a source of trauma and many girl offences are home-based actually underscores the centrality of families to girls’ development and success. Ultimately, girls in the justice system return home and their long-term success will hinge in large part on the quality of their family relationships. Viewed through this lens, family engagement for girls is both critical prevention and intervention” (Sherman & Balck, 2015, p. 47).
in raising adolescents” (Borduin et al., 1995, p. 571). This approach views young people as nested within multiple systems (family, peer, school, and neighbourhood) that have direct and indirect effects on development. Evaluations of MST have found that improved family relationships and decreased association with delinquent peers are important in the achievement of positive outcomes such as lower rates of recidivism and fewer out-of-home placements for young people who offend (Borduin et al., 1995 (US); Hipwell & Loeber, 2006 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (US)).

Leve et al. (2015 (US)) emphasise the importance of identifying individual risk and protective factors and use of evidence-based programmes (such as functional family therapy, multisystemic therapy, multidimensional family therapy), rather than assuming that “females have unique needs, and therefore unique interventions are needed” through gender-specific programmes. The importance of having clearly detailed intervention procedures and monitoring programme implementation is also underscored by various authors (for example, Hipwell & Loeber, 2006 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (US)). As Leve and colleagues (2015 (US) note, programme fidelity can be monitored through mechanisms such as computer-based management systems to track treatment goals and progress, regular reports from parents/caregivers to service providers regarding progress, and questionnaires that monitor what happens during treatment sessions.

**Supporting transitions to adulthood**

Continued support for females when exiting youth justice systems is required, particularly where they have ongoing welfare needs (CJJI, 2014 (UK)). There are some particular issues that may affect females’ transition:

- In the placement of females who have been abused,
practitioners must consider the environment that precipitated the offending behaviour, and not return females to unsafe environments as this will increase the likelihood of reoffending. All new environments or placements must be safe, secure and supportive.

- Targeted services are required to meet the unique needs of females in transition out of youth justice systems and prevent them from entering adult criminal justice systems. Successful re-entry requires range of support systems and services, including mental health and AOD, financial assistance, education and/or employment services (CJJI, 2012 (UK); Covington & Bloom, 2006 (US); Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US); Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)).

Leve et al. (2015 (US)) discuss the diminished role of the family context as a key intervention setting as young women transition to adulthood. They maintain that work around effective transitions during this period should shift to the intimate partner relationship context, in order to mitigate poor long-term outcomes for youth justice-involved females and their children related to family violence. At this time, females may also lose access to sources of support accessible to children and young people,

“Girls receiving developmentally-appropriate services in the community may suddenly be left without support and forced to negotiate housing, health care, education, employment, and child care by themselves. Juvenile justice systems do little to address these needs but child welfare and health care resources increasingly available to young adults can help these young women – and their children – obtain stable housing, education and employment” (Sherman & Balck, 2015, p. 58).
but continue to face serious risk and need, for example problems with substance use and other health issues (Sherman & Balck, 2015 (US)).

In summary, youth justice systems have developed in response to males because they comprise the bulk of the youth justice population. More recently, questions have been raised about how effectively the system is at responding to the needs of females (Quinn & Poirer, 2005 (US)). The relatively small number of young female offenders raises some practical issues in terms of responsiveness to the needs of females. For example, there are programme sustainability and economies of scale issues which also result in a small number of programmes that are able to be evaluated in order to build an evidence-base for females (Walker et al., 2016 (US); Zahn et al., 2010 (US)). It is yet unclear what specific interventions are effective for young women and young men. Some researchers have argued that gender-specific programs are required for young men and women due to possible differences in the impact of risk factors such as abuse and neglect and serious family problems (Bloom et al. 2003 (US); Chesney-Lind et al. 2008 (US); Farrington & Painter, 2004 (US)). Zahn and colleagues (2009 (US)) concluded that comprehensive and individualised programmes targeting multiple risk factors tend to work best in reducing offending behaviour, whether sex-specific or directed towards both genders. Lack of evaluations limit the capacity to learn about what practices and programmes are more effective for females (CJII, 2014 (UK); Arnull &

The high proportion of girls entering youth justice systems with background of trauma and abuse requires a systemic solution and a developmentally-informed approach (Sherman, 2012)
Eagle, 2009 (UK)). However, the need for youth justice service provision to be informed by evidence and theory is imperative in order to promote effective support to young offenders (Foley, 2008 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US)).

As yet there is insufficient evidence to identify with confidence which gender-specific programmes result in better outcomes and less recidivism for females. While it would be very helpful if research could define unequivocally what female needs are and what programme characteristics will be most effective in addressing these, it is unlikely that clear and simply solutions will ever be identified (Dickens et al., 2015 (UK)). However, in the absence of this clarity, the literature does identify some common characteristics of programmes which respond to females offending behaviour and the way in which configurations of risk and protective factors operate for them. Sherman (2012 (US)) warns, however, that an exclusive focus on evidence-based programming for youth justice females may miss creative and innovative practices among smaller, community-based organisations. Indeed, smaller programmes that are locally based may well be able to adapt more easily to the specific needs of each particular young woman. Adapatability and individualisation of programmes is something that has been identified as particularly valuable for young offenders, female and male (Walker et al., 2016 (US); Zahn et al., 2009 (UK)). This aside, the literature reviewed above identifies some common programme characteristics which are thought to make them more responsive to female needs. This includes:

1. Taking account of gendered pathways into offending and addressing the specific risks and needs of females (particularly, although not exclusively the impact of sexual abuse and family violence).
2. Having a strengths-based approach, using trauma-in
formed practices and using gender-based assessment tools.

3. Better partnerships between services to prevent females with high welfare needs entering youth justice systems.

4. Individualised interventions that are tailored to each female’s risk and need profile.

5. Including specific reference to the needs of females within policy, services and programmes.

6. Interventions need to recognise the low risk to public safety presented by the offences that young female offenders typically commit.

7. Use of diversion to avoid revictimising females whose offending behaviour is a developmentally appropriate response to trauma.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has provided an overview of the literature on females’ offending risk factors, and effective responses within youth justice systems. The review considered the evidence regarding risks and needs related to gender, whether different approaches are required to effectively work with females, and characteristics of interventions identified as effective in reducing chances of reoffending within young female offending populations. It is increasingly thought that females and males follow different pathways into and through the youth justice system. Additionally, it has been recognised that the emotional and cognitive responses females have to certain risk factors differ to those of males and that programmes to address their offending should incorporate these differences. Factors such as abuse and victimisation, difficult peer relationships and criminal associations, family dysfunction, poverty, lack of educational engagement, welfare involvement, mental health
and substance use problems, risky sexual behaviour and physical health problems, and structural disadvantage have been shown to be risk factors for females’ delinquency and offending. Many of these factors, however, are also risk factors for males. Literature identifies that offending females typically have a high level of complex and interacting problems, reflective of the risk factors they face in childhood and adolescence. Females’ rates of mental health and physical health problems, sexual and physical abuse, and risky sexual behaviour significantly exceed rates within the general population. The majority of female offending is low level, and it is argued that this means that females should be diverted from the youth justice system. It is understood that females have been overlooked within youth justice systems internationally and there are increasing calls for systems to attend to the special needs of young female offenders (Best, 2013 (NZ)).

Gender-responsive youth justice systems need to make sound assessments of links between females’ vulnerabilities and their

“Girls are far less likely than boys to end up in the penal system but when they do, their needs are often ignored or overlooked. A gender neutral youth justice system based on the risk of offending has the potential to discriminate against girls, particularly when welfare needs are confused with risk. There is a lack of understanding about the different needs of girls who end up in the criminal justice system, little evidence of what works for girls and few programmes designed specifically for girls. Girls are effectively pigeon-holed into a criminal justice system designed for the male majority.”

From Courts to Custody 2011
offending behaviour (CJJI, 2014 (UK)). Central to this is consideration of the main determinants of females’ offending, and accounting for the social realities from which females come, and to which they will likely return (Burman & Batchelor, 2009 (UK)). A comprehensive approach which targets interacting domains of risk is most likely to be effective for females (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)). The available evidence does not indicate that services should be completely different for females and males; rather it seems to suggest that females bring their own experiences that need consideration. This indicates a need for individualised programme planning rather than a generic approach. Appropriate and effective intervention in young female offending behaviour would involve multiple interventions at multiple points to overcome the challenges females with the highest risks face (Arnull & Eagle, 2009 (UK)).

Programmes that take a more wholistic approach to interventions and focus upon supporting long term change, such as Girls’ Court, appear to be effective in both reducing reoffending rates and engagement in risky behaviour. They also support the development of pro-social relationships (Davidson et al., 2011 (US)). Providing ongoing support to females has also been shown to assist in the successful transition to adulthood. This is important because continued involvement in offending significantly increases the vulnerability of their own children (Cauffman et al., 2008 (US); Leve et al., 2015 (US)). It could equally be argued that these programme elements; long term support that addresses whole-person needs, will be beneficial to young male offenders as well given that although exposed to different risks, they are likely to have come from similar family and neighbourhood backgrounds as young female offenders and thus face similar challenges in creating lives for themselves that do not feature offending.
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