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THE YOUNG FEMALE OFFENDERS

A Hong Kong Prisons Department Research Project

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I. Introduction

The Prisons Department has, in the past few years, produced two studies on young male offenders under 21 years of age. These were, "A Study of the Success and Failure of Ex-training Centre Inmates" in 1977 and "An Evaluation of the Detention Centre Programme" in 1978. They revealed salient information such as the socio-economic make-up of the young offenders, their response to the correctional programmes and the extent the programme has achieved its objectives, all of which are valuable references for the improvement of the treatment and correction of young offenders. Being the first in a series of planned studies on young female offenders, the present research was launched with a view to delineate a profile of this group and, possibly, to ascertain the reasons for their criminal activities.

The most striking fact about the involvement of girls in crime is how low this is, compared with boys. This fact is further affirmed by the present overall custodial ratio of men to women. However the difference in crime rates between men and women is not the major scope of this study, the prime concern being to explore all possible factors conducive to the commission of crime by female offenders under the age of 21.

A number of researchers have studied the relationship between the family and delinquent females. Ruth Morris found for instance that to a significant extent, delinquent girls had the highest incidence of broken homes, or of homes beset by quarrels and tensions. (1) Wadsworth revealed in his findings that mothers of delinquent girls were significantly more likely to go out to work. (2) Adamek and Dager in their study of 119 institutionalized delinquent girls found that 50% of the mothers were employed outside the home, and that 76% of the girls came from broken homes. Their findings also indicated that the girls tended to come from large families, i.e. 31% of them had five or more brothers and sisters. (3)

II. Correction for Young Female Offenders

The Prisons Department is responsible for the correction of young female offenders under three different ordinances, namely, the Prisons Ordinance, the Drug Addiction Treatment Centres Ordinance and the Training Centres Ordinance. It has been a long standing policy of the department to administer specially tailored programmes for young offenders, and Tai Tam Gap Correctional Institution which comprises a prison section and a training centre section was opened for this purpose. As there are only a small number of young female drug addicts, they are treated in the drug addiction treatment centre section in Tai Lam Centre for Women.

(1) Morris, Ruth R. (1964). Female delinquency and relational problems, Social Forces Vol. 43, 82-89.

(2) Michael Wadsworth (1979). Roots of delinquency, Martin Robertson & Co., Ltd., Chapter 10.

(3) Raymond J. Adamek and Edward Z. Dager "Familial Experiences, Identification and Female Delinquency," Sociological Focus, Spring 1969, pp 45-48.

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III. The Research Design

The lack of similar previous research as a reference for this study necessitated the implementation of a pre-test before the questionnaire was put into use. Personal interviews were administered by a trained officer and the data collected was later verified as far as possible through checking with official documents.

The questionnaire was designed along the following lines :

1. Personal particulars - age, place of birth, educational attainment, religion, employment, income.
2. Family particulars - number of brothers and sisters in the family, occupation of parents, family income.
3. Relationship with family - the highest educational level parents expected a subject to attain, family discipline, reaction towards family disciplinary methods, quarrels between parents, whether satisfied with family life, living arrangements before admission.
4. Attitude towards Sex - marital status, age when subject first had sex, attitude towards premarital sex, concept of promiscuity.
5. Environmental Factors - district of residence, type of accommodation.
6. Involvement in Crime - age when subject first committed crime, previous convictions, previous institutional sentences, triad/gang affiliation, experience with drugs, present offence, present sentence.
7. Future planning after release - confidence in leading an honest life, determination not to associate with previous friends of bad character.
8. Opinion as to whether the training centre programme was useful towards helping subjects reform.

IV. The Present Sample

A total of 67 young female offenders including 54 serving a custodial sentence on 20.8.80, and 13 admitted between 21.8.80 to 30.9.80, formed the subjects of this study.

V. The Findings

1. PERSONAL PARTICULARS

AGE ON ADMISSION

Over 65% of the girls were within the age range of 15 to 17. The mean age was 16.57. (See Table 1)

PLACE OF BIRTH

The vast majority of the girls were born in Hong Kong. Only 9% were born elsewhere. (See Table 2)

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

More than half of the girls had formal schooling up to secondary level. (See Table 3)

RELIGION

Nearly half of the girls had no religious belief. (See Table 4)

EMPLOYMENT PRIOR TO ADMISSION

Quite a large proportion of the girls (40.3%) were dance hostesses. (See Table 5) Further analysis revealed that 31.3% of them were earning extra income by prostitution or drug peddling.

MONTHLY INCOME

About one in every three girls had a monthly income of \$4,000 or more. (See Table 6) Taking into consideration their level of education, it is reasonable to believe that the girls were able to earn such high income only through the sex trade or drug peddling.

2. FAMILY PARTICULARS

NUMBER OF BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN THE FAMILY

None of the girls under study was an only child in the family. About 70% of the offenders were brought up in a family with five or more children. (See Table 8) This finding was in line with many previous studies.

OCCUPATION OF PARENTS

22.4% of the girls' fathers were employed as Craftsmen, Production-process workers or Labourers. (See Table 9) However, more than half of the girls' mothers did go out to work, which agreed with the findings of many previous researches. (See Table 10)

FAMILY INCOME

Only 12% of the girls claimed that their family income was below \$2,000 a month while 15% claimed that it was \$6,000 or more a month. (See Table 11)

3. RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY

THE HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL LEVEL PARENTS EXPECTED A SUBJECT TO ATTAIN

About one-fifth of the girls claimed that their parents had never expressed any specific expectation as to their educational achievement. (See Table 12)

FAMILY DISCIPLINE

53.8% of the girls' parents resorted to severe disciplinary methods such as physical punishment or even expulsion from family. (See Table 13)

REACTION TOWARDS FAMILY DISCIPLINE

Table 14 showed responses adopted by the girls towards the measures used by their parents to discipline them. 38.8% of the girls felt the measures unjustified.

QUARRELS BETWEEN PARENTS

Consistent with previous research findings, 53.7% of the girls acknowledged that there was an high incidence of quarrels between both parents. (See Table 15)

WHETHER SATISFIED WITH FAMILY LIFE

More than half of the girls (52.2%) admitted that they were not satisfied with their family life. (See Table 16)

LIVING ARRANGEMENT BEFORE ADMISSION

The effect of discontent with family life is that only 38.8% of the girls were living with one or both parents. (See Table 17)

4. *ATTITUDE TOWARDS SEX*

MARITAL STATUS

Before admission one in every three girls was cohabiting. (See Table 18)

AGE WHEN SUBJECT FIRST HAD SEX

61.1% of the girls admitted to have experienced sex before the age of 16. (See Table 19)

ATTITUDE TOWARDS PRE-MARITAL SEX

The study revealed that 79.1% of the girls had no objections to pre-marital sex. (See Table 20)

CONCEPT OF PROMISCUITY

35.8% of the girls agreed with the statement that there was nothing wrong with having sex with different partners. (See Table 21) This might correlate with the high percentage of girls having been prostitutes.

5. *ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS*

DISTRICT OF RESIDENCE

The majority of the girls resided in densely populated districts such as Kwun Tong, Tsuen Wan, Wong Tai Sin, Yau Ma Tei and Mong Kok. (See Table 22) (Which corresponds with the results of the 1976 By-census)

TYPE OF ACCOMMODATION

The distribution of living quarters by type (See Table 23) generally concurs with the results of the 1976 By-census. (Hong Kong By-census 1976 Main Report Vol. 1, P. 123)

6. *INVOLVEMENT IN CRIME*

AGE WHEN SUBJECT FIRST COMMITTED A CRIME

16.5% of the subjects admitted to committing their first crime before the age of 14. (See Table 24)

At the time when the girls first committed a crime, 62.7% of them were accompanied by friends of the opposite sex or both sexes.

PREVIOUS CONVICTIONS

62.7% of the girls had no previous convictions. (See Table 25)

PREVIOUS INSTITUTIONAL SENTENCES

One in every four girls had previously served one or more institutional sentences. (See Table 26)

TRIAD/GANG AFFILIATION

26.9% of the girls claimed to have affiliations with triad/gang elements. (See Table 27)

EXPERIENCE WITH DRUGS

38.8% of the girls had experience with drugs. (See Table 28) The type of drugs abused were mainly hallucinogens. (See Table 29)

PRESENT OFFENCE

Over half of the girls were convicted of property offences such as robbery, theft or larceny. Another striking fact was that two-fifths of the girls committed offences of a violent nature. (See Table 30)

PRESENT SENTENCE

86.6% of the girls were sentenced to a training centre for the present offence. (See Table 31)

7. *FUTURE PLANNING AFTER RELEASE*

CONFIDENCE IN LEADING AN HONEST LIFE AFTER RELEASE

Two in every three girls expressed confidence in leading an honest life after release. (See Table 32)

TO DESERT FRIENDS OF BAD CHARACTER AFTER RELEASE

The girls who decided to lead an honest life after release, also acknowledged the fact that not re-associating with friends of bad character was a determinant factor for them to successfully turn over a new leaf. (See Table 33)

8. *OPINION AS TO WHETHER THE TRAINING CENTRE PROGRAMME WAS USEFUL IN HELPING SUBJECTS REFORM*

82.1% of the girls considered that the training centre programme was useful to them, (See Table 34), and statistics show that 90% of them have stayed away from crime after release.

VI. *The Profile*

The female offender under study was a young girl approaching seventeen years of age. She was born in Hong Kong and had received some formal education at lower secondary level. With the desire to earn a high income, she worked as a dance hostess, a prostitute or a drug peddler, and was able to earn about \$4,000 a month.

However, she was not satisfied with family life, probably because she could not accept the discipline imposed by her parents, and also because of the high incidence of quarrelling between her parents, or her brothers and sisters. As a result she left home and lived with a boyfriend. Marriage is not important to her. She would instead favour developing emotional ties with another boy when an opportunity arose. The promiscuity of the girl might be a way of searching for the affection which was lacking in an unhappy home. Before her admission, she lived with friends of either sex in a densely populated district.

She was not a member of a triad society or a gang, and had no previous convictions and although she did not experiment with narcotic drugs, she might have tried hallucinogens in search of euphoria.

The girl was eventually sentenced to a training centre for an offence against property.

Whilst serving her sentence she looked at her past with repentance, decided to change for the better, and intended to desert friends of bad character after release.

She admitted that the training centre programme was useful to her. After receiving a suitable period of training in a training centre, the likelihood of her staying away from further crime was as high as 90% at the end of three years.

TABLE 1

AGE ON ADMISSION

<i>Years of Age</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
14	6	8.9
15	14	20.9
16	15	22.4
17	15	22.4
18	6	9.0
19	7	10.4
20	4	6.0
Total	67	100.0

\bar{X} = 16.57
(Mean Age)

TABLE 2

PLACE OF BIRTH

<i>Place of Birth</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Hong Kong	61	91.0
Macau	1	1.5
Elsewhere	5	7.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 3

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

<i>Educational Attainment</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
No Schooling/Kindergarten	3	4.5
Lower primary	7	10.4
Upper primary	23	34.3
Lower secondary	31	46.3
Upper secondary	3	4.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 4

RELIGION		
<i>Religion</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
None	31	46.2
Agonstic	15	22.4
Catholic	4	6.0
Protestant	4	6.0
Ancestral worship	2	3.0
Buddhist	9	13.4
Other	2	3.0
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 5

EMPLOYMENT PRIOR TO ADMISSION

<i>Employment</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Unemployed	6	8.9
Student	6	8.9
Housewife	3	4.5
Dance Hostess	27	40.3
Waitress	6	8.9
Factory Worker	12	18.0
Sales Worker	5	7.5
Clerical Worker	2	3.0
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 6

MONTHLY INCOME

<i>Hong Kong Dollars</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Nil	10	14.9
\$1 to less than \$500	2	3.0
\$500 to less than \$1,000	12	17.9
\$1,000 to less than \$2,000	14	20.9
\$2,000 to less than \$4,000	8	12.0
\$4,000 to less than \$7,000	10	14.9
\$7,000 to less than \$10,000	2	3.0
\$10,000 and over	9	13.4
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 7

EMPLOYMENT BEFORE ADMISSION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

<i>Employment before Admission</i>	<i>Educational Attainment</i>										<i>Total</i>	
	<i>No Schooling/ Kindergarten</i>		<i>Lower Primary</i>		<i>Upper Primary</i>		<i>Lower Secondary</i>		<i>Upper Secondary</i>			
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Unemployed	—	—	—	—	2	3.0	4	5.9	—	—	6	8.9
Student	—	—	—	—	—	—	6	8.9	—	—	6	8.9
Housewife	—	—	—	—	2	3.0	1	1.5	—	—	3	4.5
Dance Hostess	3	4.5	2	3.0	11	16.4	11	16.4	—	—	27	40.3
Waitress	—	—	—	—	1	1.5	3	4.5	2	3.0	6	8.9
Factory Worker	—	—	4	5.9	5	7.5	3	4.5	—	—	12	18.0
Sales Worker	—	—	1	1.5	2	3.0	2	3.0	—	—	5	7.5
Clerical Worker	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1.5	1	1.5	2	3.0
Total	3	4.5	7	10.4	23	34.3	31	46.3	3	4.5	67	100.0

TABLE 8

NUMBER OF BROTHERS & SISTERS IN THE FAMILY

<i>Number of Brothers & Sisters</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Nil	—	—
1	7	10.4
2	4	6.0
3	9	13.4
4	11	16.4
5	13	19.4
6	12	17.9
7	5	7.5
8	3	4.5
9	2	3.0
10	1	1.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 9

OCCUPATION OF FATHER

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Deceased	3	4.5
No knowledge	7	10.4
Unemployed	7	10.4
Fisherfolk	1	1.5
Workers in Service	12	18.0
Workers in Transport & Communication Occupation	5	7.5
Clerical & Sales Workers	7	10.4
Craftsmen, Production - Process Workers & Labourers	15	22.4
Managers & Working Proprietors	10	14.9
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 10

OCCUPATION OF MOTHER

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Deceased	2	3.0
No knowledge	5	7.5
Workers in Service	7	10.4
Clerical & Sales Workers	9	13.4
Craftsmen, Production - Process Workers & Labourers	17	25.4
Managers & Working Proprietors	3	4.5
Housewife	24	35.8
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 11

FAMILY INCOME

<i>Family Income (in HK\$)</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
No Knowledge	10	14.9
1 to less than 1,000	1	1.5
1,000 to less than 2,000	7	10.4
2,000 to less than 3,000	14	21.0
3,000 to less than 4,000	12	17.9
4,000 to less than 5,000	7	10.4
5,000 to less than 6,000	6	9.0
6,000 or above	10	14.9
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 12 THE HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL LEVEL PARENTS EXPECTED A SUBJECT TO ATTAIN

<i>Educational level</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Not any expectation	13	19.4
Primary	13	19.4
Secondary	31	46.3
Post Secondary and above	10	14.9
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 13

FAMILY DISCIPLINE

<i>Disciplinary method</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Indifference	10	14.9
Inducing	21	31.3
Scolding	31	46.3
Bodily punishment	3	4.5
Being expelled from family	2	3.0
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 14

REACTION TOWARDS FAMILY DISCIPLINARY MEASURES

<i>Reaction</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Willing to accept	12	17.9
Unwilling to accept	26	38.8
Subjects do not show care & concern	29	43.3
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 15

QUARRELS BETWEEN PARENTS

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	36	53.7
No	23	34.3
No knowledge	8	12.0
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 16

WHETHER SATISFIED WITH FAMILY LIFE

<i>Whether Satisfied with Family life</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes	32	47.8
No	35	52.2
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 17

LIVING ARRANGEMENT BEFORE ADMISSION

<i>Living Arrangement</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
With both parents	25	37.3
With father	1	1.5
With husband	1	1.5
With boy friend	19	28.3
With friends	17	25.4
Lives alone	4	6.0
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 18

MARITAL STATUS

<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Single	42	62.7
Cohabited	21	31.3
Married - Living with spouse	1	1.5
Married - Separated	3	4.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 19

AGE WHEN SUBJECT FIRST HAD SEX

Age	No.	%
No sex experience	5	7.5
12	6	9.0
13	9	13.4
14	16	23.8
15	10	14.9
16	13	19.4
17	5	7.5
18	2	3.0
19	1	1.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 20

ATTITUDE TOWARDS PRE-MARITAL SEX

Question : Do you agree with the following statement:
"If a girl is emotionally attached to her boyfriend,
they should make love before marriage."

Response	No.	%
Agree	53	79.1
Disagree	14	20.9
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 21

CONCEPT OF PROMISCUITY

Question : Do you agree with the following statement :
"There is nothing wrong with having
sex with different partners."

Response	No.	%
Agree	24	35.8
Disagree	41	61.2
No Comment	2	3.0
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 22

DISTRICT OF RESIDENCE

District	No.	%
Hong Kong Island		
Western	1	1.5
Wan Chai	2	2.9
Mid-levels	1	1.5
Happy Valley	1	1.5
North Point	1	1.5
Shaukiwan	3	4.5
Aberdeen	3	4.5
Sub-total	12	17.9
Kowloon		
Tsim Sha Tsui	2	3.0
Yau Ma Tei & Mong Kok	7	10.4
Ho Man Tin	3	4.5
Hung Hom	4	6.0
Lai Chi Kok & Cheung Sha Wan	3	4.5
Shum Shui Po	2	3.0
Kowloon City	2	3.0
Wong Tai Sin	7	10.4
Kwun Tong	10	14.9
Sub-total	40	59.7
New Territories		
Tsuen Wan	8	11.9
Yuen Long	2	3.0
Sheung Shui	4	6.0
Sha Tin	1	1.5
Sub-total	15	22.4
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 23

TYPE OF ACCOMMODATION		
<i>Type of Accommodation *</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Government Public Housing - Self contained	26	38.8
Government Public Housing - Non-self contained	11	16.4
Private Housing - Whole flat occupied by one household	20	29.8
Private Housing - Whole flat occupied by two or more households	6	9.0
Other Permanent Housing	3	4.5
Temporary Housing	1	1.5
Total	67	100.0

*Types of housing are adopted from the By-census Report, 1976, Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong.

TABLE 24

AGE ON COMMISSION OF FIRST CRIME		
<i>Age</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
10	1	1.5
11	—	—
12	1	1.5
13	9	13.5
14	7	10.4
15	8	11.9
16	11	16.4
17	13	19.4
18	6	9.0
19	7	10.4
20	4	6.0
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 25

PREVIOUS CONVICTION		
<i>No. of Previous Convictions</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Nil	42	62.7
One	19	28.3
Two	5	7.5
Three	1	1.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 26

PREVIOUS INSTITUTIONAL SENTENCE		
<i>No. of Previous Institutional Sentences</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Nil	49	73.1
One	15	22.4
Two	2	3.0
Three	1	1.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 27

TRIAD/GANG AFFILIATION		
<i>Affiliations with Triad/Gang</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Not Affiliated	49	73.0
Associated or affiliated	9	13.5
Actively Affiliated	9	13.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 28

EXPERIENCE WITH DRUGS		
<i>Experience with drugs</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
No	41	61.2
Yes	26	38.8
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 29

TYPE OF DRUGS EXPERIENCED		
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Not applicable	41	61.2
Heroin	5	7.5
Heroin/Barbitone	1	1.5
Hallucinogens	19	28.3
Other	1	1.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 30

PRESENT OFFENCE		No.	%
Against Lawful Authority :	Possession of Offensive Weapon	1	1.5
	Escape from Legal Custody	4	6.0
Against the Person :	Manslaughter	1	1.5
	Kidnapping	2	3.0
	Wounding	7	10.4
Against Property :	Burglary	2	3.0
	Robbery	17	25.3
	Blackmail	3	4.5
	Theft/Larceny	15	22.3
	Obtaining Property by Deception	3	4.5
	Handling Stolen goods	1	1.5
Against the Penal Code :	Forgery	2	3.0
Against Local Laws :	Breach of Immigration Regulations	1	1.5
	Breach of Probation Order	2	3.0
Narcotic Offences :	Manufacturing	1	1.5
	Dealing	1	1.5
	Trafficking	3	4.5
	Simple Possession	1	1.5
Total		67	100.0

TABLE 31

PRESENT SENTENCE	No.	%
Training Centre	58	86.6
Imprisonment		
Under 6 months	1	1.5
6 to less than 12 months	3	4.5
12 to less than 18 months	—	—
18 months to less than 2 years	—	—
2 years to less than 3 years	—	—
3 years to less than 6 years	4	5.9
6 years and over	—	—
Drug Addiction Treatment Centre	1	1.5
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 32 EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE IN LEADING AN HONEST LIFE AFTER RELEASE

Response	No.	%
Yes	46	68.7
No	21	31.3
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 33 TO DESERT FRIENDS OF BAD CHARACTER AFTER RELEASE

Response	No.	%
Yes	42	62.7
No	25	37.3
Total	67	100.0

TABLE 34 OPINION AS TO WHETHER THE TRAINING CENTRE PROGRAMME IS USEFUL IN HELPING SUBJECTS REFORM

Opinion	No.	%
Useful	55	82.1
Not Useful	2	3.0
No comment	1	1.5
Not applicable (Including 8 prisoners and 1 DATC inmate)	9	13.4
Total	67	100.0

END